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GERRY ANDERSON'S UFO

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ROBERT MIALL

UFO

A PAN ORIGINAL

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UFO

1

IT WAS in all the newspapers. But it was not all in the newspapers, not exactly the way it happened.

Those men had come together for a purpose, and it was better that the world should not know too much about it. Nationwide panic, worldwide hysteria weren't going to help. There were D notices and official censors, and censors whom nobody knew existed. And all because of those other things which ought not to have existed—the biggest headache in the history of mankind, a headache that was going to cost more and more to treat, let alone cure.

The US Air Force plane made its landing in England that day without fuss. Supply planes came in daily, training sorties went up so often that the villagers were inured to their streets sounding like echo chambers for jets of all sizes and shapes and decibel outputs.

There was a Rolls-Royce waiting, with two police motorcycles in attendance. It had attracted a few glances as it swung in towards the gates of the airbase, but no more than that: top brass often went through here in style, offered every comfort at the taxpayers' expense.

General Henderson acknowledged salutes as he left the plane, gave a peremptory jerk of his head to cut short the formalities, and moved briskly towards the Rolls. A young officer opened the door. Another young man was behind Henderson as he slid into the interior.

The chauffeur stared straight ahead, flanked by an attentive but impassive Special Branch man. In the back seat a man in his middle forties, with grey hair and grey eyes and a stern mouth, held out a hand to the General.

Henderson said: 'Minister, this is Colonel Straker.'

The younger man shook hands and settled himself on the pull-down seat facing them, resting his left arm across his knees to adjust the weight of a document case chained to his wrist.

'The Prime Minister is already at Chequers. We'll be there in thirty minutes,' said the Minister.

The cycles throbbed into life. The gates opened, the little group turned out on to the road, and a flicker of sunlight and tree shadows increased its tempo across the Englishman's grave features.

He went on: 'We've been in constant communication with Paris,

Moscow and Bonn during your visits. I can assure you that my Government's approval will be a formality.'

'The evidence is absolutely conclusive.'

The General nodded to his aide. Colonel Straker opened the document case and passed a clip of typed notes across, together with two photographs. The Minister winced at the mangled body shown on the first picture; caught his breath at the incredible object framed in the centre of the other.

'It couldn't possibly be a fake?'

'The film was found undeveloped,' said Henderson, 'still in the camera. It's genuine. Take my word for it.'

The sunlight faded. Clouds darkened the road and the fields and the interior of the car.

The Minister shivered. 'It's . . . too much like some grotesque hoax. Men from Mars . . . flying saucers . . . a music-hall joke."

'No joke. I wish it were.'

There was a sudden blaze of lightning. Only it wasn't lightning. There was an explosion, a hundred yards back by the roadside, that buffeted the Rolls.

Straker's hand was out. 'I'll take the file, sir.'

As the Minister handed the sheets back to him, there was another flash, another brutal shock wave against the car.

'Get down!'

Abruptly there was intolerable light all round them, a crackle of breaking glass, and the howl of tires—and somewhere a man screaming in agony, and then dizziness and a stomach-lurching moment as there was no weight, no certainty, only the sensation of falling.

The Rolls came to rest against a tree, jarring to rest and exploding in a gout of flame. Straker was hurled from a door as it sprang open. He got to his feet, fell, crawled away. Then he forced himself to turn back towards the searing flames. Henderson was groping to escape. Straker shielded his eyes with his arm, stumbled up the ragged slope.

'The Minister . . .?'

A charred, curling shred of photographic print fluttered across the grass. It showed a corner of that impossible device. Impossible? But what else could have blazed from the clouds; what else would have struck them down as it had struck and seared and mutilated others?

It had gone away now. But it would come back, or others of its kind would come back. There was no way of telling when, no way of

knowing how many of them there might be, no way of preparing for them.

Not yet.

Pink elephants, double vision, flying saucers, weather balloons, spots before the eyes: drink too much at a party, take your choice, and laugh like hell about it.

It was no joke. Not even a bad joke.

They would come again.

They did come again. They kept coming.

Not funny. Far from funny when a manned space capsule blew up ten thousand miles from the Moon. Far from funny when a jumbo jet with a full load of paying passengers came apart over the Atlantic, with only one last incredulous yell from the pilot to identify what he thought he had seen.

Far from funny if the public got to know the truth. They mustn't know.

2

PAUL FOSTER levelled out at 250,000 feet and checked cabin pressure, temperature, and the airspeed indicator. His co-pilot raised an approving thumb, and they both grinned. Touching 5,000 miles an hour, and there wasn't a tremor.

'It's a fine night,' said Paul.

'If it stays like this I think I'll go sailing tomorrow.'

'Down on that lake?'

Through the faint cloud haze the Atlantic was a solid pattern of tiny ridges, silvered spasmodically by moonlight. It looked tranquil down there. And it was tranquil up here, too: they floated in clear sky on the fringe of space.

Paul shook himself. There was a job to do. He flipped a switch.

'XV-104 to Control. Approaching area G-6. Will start test schedule thirty seconds from now.'

He checked that the all-important flight recorder was operating, and started the nose camera. Whatever happened, whatever went right or wrong, there had to be a record for the bright boys to carry out their post-mortem. At the same time his co-pilot was running through final panel check routine. At a measured pace he began to intone: 'Course steady 014. Just coming up. Right. Sector minus 10, minus 9 . . . airspeed . . .'

He faltered. Paul went taut. There could be no mistakes at this stage.

Then he saw what the co-pilot had seen.

'Jim . . .!'

'I know.' Jim was hoarse. 'But what *is* it?'

It was a pulsation of light, something shimmering in like a runaway meteor, brightening and swelling from a pinhead to something more substantial.

They were closing fast.

Paul glanced at Jim, and glimpsed the leather case on the floor between them.

'That reconnaissance camera of yours—get busy with it. Try and get some real close shots.'

This time there was going to be no mistake. Twice before he had reported sightings like this, but he hadn't had one of the infallible nose cameras then, nor a co-pilot with a camera to confirm it. Twice before, wide awake and fully alert, as any test pilot had to be when he was about to put a new crate through its paces, he had seen just such whirling, scintillating objects; and had reported them; and had been laughed at. But not this time.

He kept the plane resolutely on its collision course, ready to peel off at the last possible moment.

'Keep that camera turning.'

The crackle of a distant voice snapped an order into his ears. 'Control to XV-104.'

'What is it, Control?'

'Alter course to 024.'

'Listen, we've got—'

'This is urgent. Repeat, urgent. Alter course now.'

'Listen, forget the test programme. We're really on to something up here I'll explain later.'

'This comes right from the top. Alter course.'

Paul Foster opened his mouth, and closed it again. The voice snapped agitatedly in his ear, but he had stopped listening.

This time he was going back with the proof.

Jim let out a yelp. 'It's fantastic—another aircraft. But what . . .?'

Climbing steeply up the sky was a slim cone with narrow fins, climbing purposefully like a fighter plane out for the kill, but like no fighter Paul had ever seen in the air or on the drawing-board.

They were all three racing towards a point of impact. The stranger from out of space was clear now. It was no flying saucer—an inverted cup, rather, marked with blobs of what might be portholes or fuel tanks of some kind. The film would show: magnified, analysed, taken apart by experts, it would tell everything.

A thin line of light seemed for an instant to connect the oncoming vessel with the plane below. Then there was a puff of light, swelling into an intolerable dazzle. Paul's co-pilot ducked his head away from the glare. The intruder had been shot out of the sky. The rising fighter went into a long arc, preparatory to descending. Paul fought with the controls. His own plane was snatched to one side, as though plucked by a giant hand. It turned, spiraled, and began to dive. Blood pounded in his ears. Through it a voice asked, and asked again, 'Do you receive me? Do you receive me? Control to XV-104. Come in, XV-104. Come

in, please. Come in . . .'

The co-pilot was slumped in his seat, his head at an odd angle. Paul tried to reach out to him, then wrestled once more with the controls. His eyesight seemed to be fading. The savage light of that explosion was burning now, more than it had done at the time. Only a few seconds ago, but so far behind . . . plunging so fast, heading for destruction.

'No,' he said grimly.

The suicidal speed of the descent was burning up the plane. He had to get out. Had to level off—no, no use, couldn't do it—had to stop, to turn, to do something . . . *something* . . . had to get out.

His eyes pulsed in such an agony that he wanted to claw them out.

Everything was coming apart.

'No,' he yelled. And again, 'No.'

Then he was lapped in silence. He struggled to free himself from the nightmare. He reached for the controls and couldn't find them. His eyes stung viciously, and he tried to put his hands up to them; but his hands were wrapped in something heavy, and there were thick, opaque glasses before his eyes.

Somewhere a door opened. A light switch snapped on, but all he saw was the feeblest glow.

'My eyes—what's happened to my eyes?'

'Temporary blindness, Mr Foster.' It was an authoritative, soothing professional voice. 'In a few days you'll be able to see as well as ever.'

'Where am I?'

'Grenville Hospital. You ejected just in time. My name's Frazer. Doctor Frazer.'

Paul groped for understanding. There was a vast, dark nothingness between that last moment in the plane and now.

'How long have I been here?'

'Six days.'

'Is Jim in here too?' When there was no reply he insisted: 'Where's Jim—what happened to him?'

'It must have been instantaneous. I'm sorry.'

Paul lay quite still for a moment. Then he moved his arm, felt the pain in it, and tried to push himself upright.

'I've got a report to make.'

'When you're fully recovered—'

'A report. Urgent. If you'll get me a pen and some paper—'

‘You can’t have those bandages off for a few days yet.’

‘A secretary, then. Somebody. Anybody. I tell you I’ve got to send in my report. They’ve got to know.’

‘Now you’re awake, I think it’s time we fixed some food for you,’ said Frazer amiably.

Paul Foster was thirty years of age, and tough. He had always wanted to be where the action was. Once he had broken both legs in a racing-car smash, and had come out of hospital and started again. He had flown and proved the worth of the three fastest jets so far known to man, and if the latest one had been blown out of the heavens that wasn’t going to stop him going back up there at the first opportunity. He wanted to go much further out, to keep pushing back the limits.

He was certainly not prepared to lie obediently in bed and take things easy.

On the third day, when he found he could see across the room without the shielding glasses, and when his fingers were itching under the bandages, he took off the bandages himself and bullied a young nurse into fetching pen and paper.

He wrote a shaky but legible report to the President of the Ventura Aircraft Corporation, and asked that his notes should be studied in conjunction with processed film from the reconnaissance camera.

He waited for a reply.

There was none.

Two weeks later Paul walked in through the gates, accepted a welcoming handshake from the security guard, a kiss from one of the secretaries, and a barrage of slaps on the shoulder from designers and engineers who wanted him to know that they forgave him for having piled up their expensive creation. He went to the suite of offices on the fifth floor, waved aside a secretary who wanted to grab him rather than kiss him, and marched into the President’s sanctum.

Kofax was suave, skilful, and a convincing talker. In his job, he had to be. He had to persuade technicians and temperamental executives on one side, and Government representatives on the other.

‘Hello, Paul. Nice to see you. Sit down, sit down. It’s really wonderful to see you again.’

Paul was not convinced. Only one thing would convince him.

He said: ‘I was hoping to get some reply to my report. It seemed pretty significant to me. What’s the verdict? What action’s being taken?’

Kofax smiled tolerantly. He took his time. It looked as though he hadn't got a trouble in the world; as though nobody could possibly have a trouble in the world.

'Paul, I find myself with two hats. One as President of the Corporation, the other as a friend of yours. Now, let's wear the friendly one. How do you feel?'

'Fine,' said Paul curtly.

'The doctors say you're in great shape.'

'They should know.'

'All the same . . .' The President leaned forward, his smile warm and comradely. 'You've been through a nasty experience. A traumatic experience. Maybe it's shaken you up more than you realize right now. What are your immediate plans?'

Paul wasn't going to give an inch. 'Suggest something.'

'I was thinking in terms of a vacation. Let's say a couple of months. On full pay, of course. Till you're sure you feel absolutely fit.'

'I feel fit,' said Paul.

'You think you do. Let's see, a couple of months from now—'

'One question.'

Kofax hesitated, but kept his smile in place. 'Fire away.'

'Where's the film from that camera?'

'Now, you don't want to go getting yourself all wound up.'

'Where is it? And what about my statement—you read it?'

'Your statement,' said Kofax gently. 'Written three days after coming out of a six-day—'

'Six days, six weeks, what's the difference? What I wrote is true. That's the way it happened. Have you had that film processed or haven't you?'

'The film and the plane—what's left of it—are with a military investigation team.'

'Military investigation?'

'We have a defence contract. It's standard procedure.'

'All right.' Paul got to his feet. 'I want a hearing.'

'With the military?'

'With anyone who's interested. Anyone who's intelligent enough to listen—and look at the evidence.'

'Paul—'

'Do you make the appointment, or do I have to go looking for them

myself?'

The friendly smile was starting to slip. There was a bite in Kofax's voice. 'I've tried to help you. But if you want it the hard way . . . Look, they'll pull that story of yours to shreds. You'll never fly again. You understand that? Men who have hallucinations—they're not the best folk to have way up there, now are they? You'll never fly again for me, or for anyone else. Do you read me?'

'Keep wearing that hat,' said Paul icily. 'It suits you.'

Kofax reached for the telephone, then pointedly waited. Paul spun on his heel and walked out.

The appointment was made. Twenty-four hours later he met a man called Jackson.

The rendezvous was an unexpected one. Paul had anticipated being shown into some drab, featureless office behind Whitehall, or maybe some well-guarded manor out in the country. Instead, he found himself in a plushily equipped executive jet, being offered coffee by a Malayan girl who could hardly have failed to be elected Miss Airline Hostess of 1980 if she had cared to let her name go forward.

Jackson was casual in his dress and in his manner, but there was steel beneath the sleek synthetic shirt and slacks,

'Comfort, privacy, complete security—what more could you ask for?'

'The answers to a couple of questions.' Paul was not going to be coaxed off course.

'Try me.'

'Where's the film from the XV-104?'

'Your jet crashed in twenty fathoms. It was quite a salvage operation. Sea water plays havoc with photographic equipment.'

'That camera was dust-proof, water-proof, shock-proof.

You name it, it was proof.'

'As I was about to say'—Jackson sipped his coffee—'the camera in question was fortunately undamaged.'

Paul felt a weight lift from his mind. However reluctant they might be to admit to the truth, they had to accept the evidence of their own eyes. They would hardly have let him get this far if they hadn't been convinced, anyway.

'So,' he said, 'did I or did I not see an unidentified flying object?'

'A what?'

‘UFO,’ said Paul. ‘Isn’t that the accepted term for it? UFO—Unidentified Flying Object.’

‘You’re not sure?’

‘OK, Jackson. Let’s stop fencing. That film shows close-ups of an object, right?’ When Jackson did not reply, he went on: ‘I’m an experienced test pilot. I don’t see stars. Not if they’re not there, I don’t. That thing was extra-terrestrial. I know it, you know it.’

Jackson lifted his hand and snapped his fingers idly, as though calling for more coffee. A monitor screen athwart the cabin sparked into colourful activity. Against the night immensity of space, a light climbed into view.

Paul hunched forward.

It was the wrong light. Not the first one they had seen, but the other—the aircraft that had come up so fast and lashed out so destructively.

‘That’s the other one,’ he said.

‘The other one?’ Jackson was leisurely, confident.

‘What have you done?’ He knew what ought to have been there, right in the centre, gleaming above that predator as it raced in from its crazy angle.

‘What have you done? We didn’t start shooting until we had a positive sighting.’ Fiercely it surged out of him: ‘What have you done?’

The mysterious plane climbed, turned rhythmically over into its arc, and then was blotted out; Like everything else, thought Paul with a shudder of memory that was a physical terror—everything else blotted out as the XV-104 dived to its death.

‘Done?’ echoed Jackson. ‘You recognize that aircraft, right?’

‘It was there. Yes. It came in after—’

‘We’ve checked. There was a military jet operating in that area. You photographed it. But as you’ve seen, there’s nothing else on that film, Foster.’

‘You’ve erased it.’

‘Why should I do that?’

‘You’ve fixed it.’ Paul was driven to his feet, knocking his coffee cup aside. ‘Why? That’s what you’re going to tell me or I’ll knock that smile right back down your throat.’

He was on his way towards Jackson when a slim arm slid up around his neck. He was twisted to one side as easily as though he were that lost plane, caught in some whirlpool of force. The slender girl’s musky perfume was in his nostrils. Her arm was like a boa-constrictor around his neck.

Jackson said: ‘Things are not always what they seem to be, Mr Foster. Watch.’

Paul was released. He fingered his throat as Jackson picked up a gold cigarette lighter, tossed it up, and caught it as it fell.

‘Did you see it stop?’ asked Jackson. ‘I throw it up, and it falls back into my hand. But for a split second at the top of the trajectory it stops. Did you see it?’

It was an old trick, an old demonstration. Paul snorted.

‘It did stop?’ Jackson insisted.

‘If you say so.’

‘No, Foster. It didn’t. It’s moving forward at 500 knots, like everything else in this plane. And the whole aircraft is moving with the rotation of the earth. Confusing, but fact. Apparent facts can be just as confusing . . . in an aircraft, at night . . . at 250,000 feet. Now tell me. What did you really see, or think you saw, from that cockpit?’

‘An extra-terrestrial spacecraft,’ said Paul firmly.

‘Hm. A trick of the light?’

‘No.’

‘A reflection from the instrument panel, maybe. Refraction through the glass of your visor and the windscreen. A hundred explanations.’

‘Only one,’ said Paul, ‘and you know it.’

‘You reported a sighting five years ago.’ So they knew that much, thought Paul with strange exhilaration: they were as interested as that! ‘And,’ said Jackson, ‘another one three years ago. You’re quite a one for seeing things, aren’t you, Foster?’

‘Am I the only one?’

The question provoked a slight flicker, just enough to assure Paul that somehow, somewhere deep down, whatever they might say or not say, he was right.

Jackson said: ‘You really do intend to be difficult, don’t you?’

‘Only if you make it difficult. Wouldn’t it be easier to tell me the lot?’

But nothing was going to be made easy. He ought to have known better than to hope that the meeting with Jackson would provide any answers. They had simply been sounding him out, not offering help. The luxurious jet came down at what might have been a small private flying club or might have been something quite different. As the whine of the engines died, Jackson said in the mildest sort of way: ‘All this has been confidential, of course.’

‘Suppose I don’t accept that?’

‘It’ll still remain confidential. One way or another, we’ll see to that.’

Paul had a drink on the way home. He had another. He wanted to get his hands on somebody or something, and shake out the truth. If there *were* these sinister objects flying in from the depths of space . . .

If? There was no question of it. He had seen them. They existed. Pretending they weren’t there, hoping they’d just go away—no, it made no sense.

Reluctantly he went home. Reluctantly, because at home there was nobody but himself: nobody to grab and fight, nobody to argue with.

Nobody. Which made it pretty strange that the door should be unlocked.

He put his fingers gently against the woodwork. There was a thin cold sweat line across his forehead, and another across his shoulders. It was just the same when he reached a crucial moment in flying, when the next second might bring catastrophe.

He pushed the door open and stormed in.

Well, if he had to have an intruder, he was prepared to settle for one like this. She was leaning against the bookcase as though she owned the place, and he wouldn’t have minded her having a share in it, at that. Her weight was on her right foot, her left hip poised and alluring. When she looked round at him, the fleck of hazel colouring in her eyes glowed like that of some exotic cat. Light struck a bronze echo from her hair.

Paul said: ‘You don’t specialize in strangleholds, do you?’

She subjected him to a cold, disconcerting appraisal. Then she said:

‘Why did you murder my brother?’

3

HE HAD finished. He was getting weary of telling the story. It had been written into his report, and he had hammered away at the truth of it to both Kofax and Jackson, for all the good it had done; and now he had gone over every meticulous detail to this girl Janna, Jim's sister.

She sat with her head bowed. It was impossible to guess whether she was stunned or just doggedly sceptical.

'Look,' he said. 'As long ago as 1968 no less an authority than the United States Air Force issued a report officially denying the existence of UFOs. Why?'

'Maybe,' she said limply, 'because they just didn't exist, just like they said.'

'Why deny it? Why trouble?'

'I don't know. I don't understand.'

'Neither do I. And I'm not going to be happy until I do.'

Janna raised her eyes. 'They told me you'd thought up a crazy story to cover wrecking an expensive aircraft, and killing my brother.'

'Did they, now? Charming of them.' Angrily he slopped Scotch into two glasses and thrust one at Janna. 'I swear to you,' he said, stimulated by the fire of the whisky in his throat, 'that Jim and I saw something up there. Jim would tell you the same if he was here.'

'I believe you.'

She said it with strange intensity, as though momentarily stepping out of a role she was playing and speaking as her real self.

Dubiously Paul said: 'Did they have anything else to say to you?' As she shook her head, he drank again, and suddenly memory came up like a great belch. 'Just a minute! The other one—the other camera. Your brother had a recce camera. Do you know if *that* was recovered?'

'There were some personal effects.' Why had her voice changed back again? 'Only I'm not allowed to have them yet.'

'Why not?'

'Something to do with military security.'

Military security, he thought dourly. A wonderful excuse for falsifying evidence, for evasion—a doctored film, a gush of smooth talk . . .

‘Who told you this?’ he demanded.

‘Jim’s big boss. A man called Kofax.’

‘I know him,’ said Paul. ‘Oh, yes, I know him.’ He tipped back the rest of the drink. ‘Listen, do me a favour. Wait here for me.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘Follow my nose. And the scent seems pretty strong to me. Not to say rank.’

He left her and drove to the plant. It was a route he knew off by heart. If anyone had been carrying out speed checks anywhere along it, he’d have been in a lot of trouble. At ordinary times the journey could take forty-five minutes, provided the traffic wasn’t bad. This time he did it in twenty-seven minutes. The gateman was surprised to see him.

‘Thought you were on leave, Mr Foster.’

‘So did I. And then I find I’ve left my chequebook in my office drawer, my address book ditto, and somewhere or other there must be a spare set of keys I used to leave with Miss Smithson.’

He signed the book and walked through. The office he shared, when he was on the premises, with a projects liaison executive was on the second floor. He went past the second and on up to the fifth. None of Kofax’s attendant dragons was there to intercept him. It took him less than five minutes to open two filing cabinets with a nail file, and another minute to find a duplicate set of keys in one drawer. He tensed as he opened the safe, waiting for alarm bells to ring all over the building. There was silence. He probed in with a torch.

Kofax didn’t keep much in the safe. It was a personal one rather than the firm’s. But it did give shelter to a camera that Paul Foster recognized at once. Without a doubt it was Jim’s—salvaged, and well looked after.

He took it out, dislodging a letter which had been folded and propped against it. The beam of the torch flipped across the signature.

Ed Straker.

‘Straker,’ murmured Paul aloud. It meant something, aroused some faint echo.

In the distance he heard the clatter of a fireproof door closing, then opening. The security man was on his rounds, testing. Paul pocketed his torch, and silently closed the safe and filing cabinets in near darkness. When the footsteps had died away he strolled out, signed out at the gate, and drove back to his flat more cautiously than he had driven here more cautiously because he now felt that he was close to producing the evidence he needed, and he wanted to stay alive to do

it.

He wondered whether Janna would have obeyed him and still be waiting.

She was there. She was sound asleep on the couch. He lifted her and carried her into the bedroom, and she didn't wake up.

Paul slumped on the couch himself, with another glass of whisky beside him. He had a lot of thinking to do. Tomorrow, when he'd processed the film in Jim's camera, and tracked down that elusive yet meaningful name . . .

'Ed Straker.' Again he tried it aloud. And again. 'Ed Straker.'

He was dead beat. He was still mumbling the name when he fell asleep, waking in the morning light with a stiff neck and cramp in his right leg.

The film was blank. Someone had been interested enough to doctor it before allowing it to be replaced with the dead man's effects.

Paul conjured up a vision of Kofax and Jackson, sitting side by side, smirking at him. They were mockingly asking if he was satisfied now. Not a trace of fairy lights, misleading reflections. Nothing. Didn't that prove what they had been saying to him?

As though she, too, saw those complacent faces, Janna said: 'Paul . . . mightn't it be better just to . . . well, forget it all?'

'I can't forget it. Can't just drop it.'

'No. I didn't think you would.' Again there was that disconcerting note, an unhappy discord in the music of her voice.

He wanted to put his arms round her. An ironic laugh bubbled up inside him, but didn't pass his lips. He'd had her in the place all night, never thought of her as a woman, and now he wanted to put his arms round her. How? Protectively, lovingly . . . in a brotherly way, because she was good old Jim's sister?

He said: 'I'll be out most of the day. See you when I get back?'

'I . . . don't know. What are you after this time?'

'Someone called Straker.'

'Straker,' she repeated dully.

'It's there in the back of my mind. In a newspaper, somewhere—I can see it, only not quite. You know how it is. The name's there all right, and it's there again a bit later, in some other context. But I'll find it. I'll go through the microfilm indexes for ten years, if I have to.'

In fact he found it just within the ten-year period. And then found the second reference. The computer identified the issues, and the two

films were delivered to him in the projector cubicle.

Colonel Ed Straker, United States Air Force. Escaped alive from a burning car, but was unable to save British Cabinet Minister who had met him and another high-ranking American officer at an airbase in Southern England. There was no mention of the other officer's name, or of his fate. A formal obituary lamented the loss of a member of the Government who had shown every sign of becoming a great statesman. The meeting with the Americans had, it was announced, been a routine one in connection with the stationing of USAF personnel in England and some adjustments in costs, to be mutually agreed. No one could explain how the Rolls had spun out of control and crashed through a wall, catching fire as it went.

The later story about Straker was in a different vein. At first it seemed unlikely that it could be the same man, but a reference to early retirement from a distinguished military career confirmed it. Ed Straker was now a film tycoon. He had chosen to settle in England and establish the Harlington-Straker Studios, and when other American companies had withdrawn from Europe because of mounting costs and their own need to diversify back home, he had stayed on.

The facts were there all right, but not the reasons. It was quite a leap—Air Force Colonel with a degree in astrophysics, two years on lunar research at MIT, suddenly jumping into the movie business.

Paul decided he would like to meet Ed Straker.

He went back to the flat to report his findings. Janna had gone. There was no message, no 'See you later', no scribbled telephone number where he might find her. He felt a twinge of disappointment. There had been a lot on his mind these last few weeks, but once he had shifted some of it out of the way he would have been in the mood for someone like Janna, someone with a shape like that and a wry little mouth like that and a voice like hers.

She'd have to wait. He might go looking for her, later. Right now he was going looking for Straker.

The studios were ten miles from central London, set between a village embowered in old elms, and a modern housing estate. Thrusting above high walls, a few plasterboard towers swayed above an abandoned lot. Somewhere a wind machine was blowing up a storm.

He was greeted by a trim secretary who could have been older than she looked: the shrewd appraisal of her eyes resulted, Paul was sure, in an instant categorization—would-be star, electrician, chippie, gossip columnist?

He said: I'd like to see Mr Ed Straker. My name's Paul Foster.'

‘Ah, yes.’ He could almost hear the relays triggering off. ‘He’s been expecting you.’

‘I don’t think so. I didn’t make an appointment. Had to come out here in a hurry.’

‘All the same, I fancy you’re expected.’ She leaned towards the intercom on her desk and thumbed a button. Paul didn’t hear the exact words of the reply, but something in the confidence of the metallic sound made him uneasy. They really had been waiting for him. They’d got him on a string. How hard were they going to tug? The woman said: ‘He’ll meet you in Downing Street.’

‘Downing Street?’

‘That’s right.’ She indicated a side door.

Bewildered, wondering what kind of trap he was walking into, or what joke was being played on him, Paul went out beside a sequence of sound stages. Then he saw. Where the main yard came to an end, a set of Downing Street began. Halfway along it, a man who looked too much like a film executive to be anything but a film executive was waiting outside Number 10.

He put his hand out as Paul approached. ‘You must be Foster. I’m Straker. Ed Straker.’ As they shook hands, he yelled over the non-existent rooftops: ‘Where are you, Louis?’

There was a muffled response. A moment later a burly, squat man with a tape measure looped round his neck came out of where Whitehall ought to be.

‘It’s gonna work, Louis,’ said Straker. ‘Go right ahead. I’d like a ground plan first thing in the morning.’

‘Fine, Mr Straker.’

‘My construction manager,’ Straker explained as Louis plodded away. ‘A great guy.’ He paced down the centre of the street. ‘What’s on your mind. Mr Foster?’

‘Unidentified flying objects,’ said Paul bluntly.

‘Not a bad subject. No, good. Could be quite an idea. Got a script?’

‘I’m talking about the real thing, Mr Straker. I saw one.’

They stopped and turned to look back along the façades of the street. Paul was pervaded by a sense of unreality, just as he had been once or twice in Janna’s company. Only here the feeling was even more justifiable: the set was unreal, the dialogue didn’t belong, it was all a cinematic fantasy.

‘Tell me about it,’ said Straker.

Paul told him. How many more times would he go over, and over

the same story, still getting no further?

When he had finished, Straker pursed his dry, bleached lips. ‘Quite a tale, Mr Foster. But not really for us. I’m in the film business. If you want to sell me a script, OK. But not true romances. Not my line. Try the police or something. I have a heavy schedule.’

He was turning away when Paul said: ‘It must have been quite a switch, Colonel.’

‘You must have your lines crossed someplace.’

‘Colonel Ed Straker. I’d have thought you’d have been running the Moon by now, not just a picture palace.’

Straker was beside him again. Somehow they were walking in step again, at a leisurely pace, past the end of the building and towards a door. Straker prodded it open. They went through on to a deserted sound stage.

‘We won’t be disturbed here.’ Straker had a gun in his hand. He spun it round his finger as though it were merely a prop. ‘It’s soundproof, too.’

‘Is that thing real?’

Straker lifted the gun and pointed it at a hunk of scenery propped against the far wall. He fired. There was a splintering of wood, and a little pattern of holes dotted what had been a sylvan glade.

‘What sort of charade do you think you’re playing?’ Paul kept his voice steady.

‘I’m not playing. Believe me, I’m not playing.’

‘And believe me’—it burst out uncontrollably—‘I’ve had just about enough. I’ve been through a lot these last weeks. First there was Kofax. I found a letter from you in his safe. It was innocent enough—but what was it doing there? And Jackson from the military investigation team—where does he fit in? And who fixed our record film, and fixed Jim’s shots as well?’

‘Show me one piece of evidence,’ said Straker. ‘Just one.’

‘I’ll come up with it,’ raged Paul. ‘I don’t get distracted easily. I’ll keep digging the mud until some of it sticks.’

‘You’re making a big mistake, Foster.’

Paul turned towards the door. ‘You haven’t heard the last of me,’ he promised.

‘A big mistake,’ Straker repeated. ‘Foster . . . are you going to change your mind—forget the whole crazy dream?’

‘It’s no dream. And I’m not forgetting.’

‘What a pity’

The voice had hardened. Hearing the threat in it, Paul spun round. The gun was pointing unwaveringly at him.

Straker fired.

4

NO ECHOES bounced back. There was no blast, no tearing pain, no resonance. Paul stood where he was. He could still breathe, still hear, still see: could see Straker twirling the gun round his finger once more.

Straker said: 'Ingenious device, huh? An acoustic gun. You place charges in the wall of a set'—he waved towards the punctured scenery —'and the pulse of the gun when it's fired detonates the charges. Gives the impression of the real thing.' His grip tightened, the gun stopped spinning. 'I think we have a few more surprises for you, Foster.'

Without waiting for a reply he crossed the stage. Paul found that he was following. There was something about the man's air of authority —something icy, detestable even, yet compelling. If Straker were to issue an order, even in the mildest tone, you'd find yourself obeying before thinking to ask what right he had to issue orders.

He opened a farther door and they went down a corridor. It emerged into the reception office where the knowing, unfathomable secretary sat at her desk. She nodded amiably at Paul.

'Open up,' said Straker.

There was the faintest tremor of surprise. Then, as the obedient responses clicked into place, the woman pressed a button. An inner door opened. Straker waved Paul through.

When they were inside, he said: 'You're a test pilot. Trained to expect the unexpected.'

'Sounds as though you know a lot about me.'

'Brace yourself.'

The office was tastefully furnished yet stark. It was a surprise to see anything as ordinary as a cigarette box on the wide, curving desk.

Straker flipped open the lid of the box.

He said: 'Straker.'

A weirdly impersonal, dehydrated voice spoke out of the box like an imprisoned genie.

'Voice Print Identification positive. Commander Straker.'

The floor began to give way beneath Paul. It wasn't an illusion, not

just some fit of dizziness: the whole room was descending like a high-speed lift. He reached out to grab something, to steady himself; but there was only the room itself, all in motion.

It whispered to a halt.

'Where are we?'

Straker opened the innocuous door through which they had so recently come.

'Underground headquarters.'

'Headquarters . . . of what?'

'SHADO.'

'And what's SHADO when it's at home?'

Straker gestured towards an austerely lettered plaque on the wall of the corridor stretching ahead of them. It read:

SUPREME HEADQUARTERS ALIEN DEFENCE ORGANIZATION

Before Paul could take this in, he found he was marching behind Straker through what must surely have been just another film set—but one more staggering, a thousand times more expensive, and much further on into a futuristic world than anything on the lots and stages above.

A computer bank occupied a vast cavern. Lights carried on a silent chatter at a central console. Two girl operatives in sleek, form-hugging blue uniforms and ascetically uniform hairstyles glanced up as Paul passed, allowed themselves a moment's amazement, and then lowered their gaze again to the flashing complexity of their tasks.

Yet another door, another small office—with what gimmicks in store?

Paul hesitated in the doorway. Then he realized from Straker's expression that hesitation was useless. There was no going back now. He was being given no choice of decisions. He had walked into it, and they had been waiting for him.

He walked on the last few steps, and hoped that Straker's wry grin was a good omen.

Straker spoke into a grille beside his desk.

'Wheel them in, Alec.'

Paul fought for words. The idea of a labyrinth like this below the houses, fields and studios was too much for him to take in and

analyse. It was a dream, a wild extravaganza. Absurdly he wondered if he was going to be offered a part in some pseudo-scientific melodrama.

'You were over the Atlantic,' Straker said, 'on a test flight. You nearly got killed—by us. We did our damndest to have you diverted, but you were too stubborn, weren't you? Sheer dogged stupidity made you disobey orders.'

'After what we'd just seen—'

'Yes. After what you'd seen. You found yourself right in the middle of a UFO incident. Right in the middle,' Straker emphasized harshly, 'of our firing area.'

'But you fired, all the same.'

'Yes. We fired. When one of those things comes in like a bat out of hell, we don't pull our punches. It goes right back . . . to hell. And if anybody's stupid enough to get in the way, he has to go too.'

Footsteps swished gently across the springy plastic flooring. Paul turned to face a stranger . . . and a man he already knew.

'This is Colonel Freeman,' Straker was saying. 'Dr Frazer you already know.'

Paul was mute.

'Hello, Foster,' said Frazer. 'How are the eyes?'

Straker said: 'We induced a temporary blindness to keep you on ice for a few days.'

'Kofax—'

'Kofax knows nothing of all this, but he played along. Played along and didn't ask awkward questions. He has a military contract.'

Two newcomers added themselves to the group.

'Operatives Doug Jackson and Tsi Chan.'

Not a Malayan girl, thought Paul numbly. Or only half. Or . . . well, how was he to know—how much more was there to know, and where did all the pieces fit? He stared incredulously at Jackson.

'A psychiatrist,' Straker explained, 'as well as a trained interrogator. His report told me quite a bit about you.'

'Determined, good logical thought,' said Jackson. 'Good logical thought pattern. A little headstrong.'

'And you've met Louis, our electronics expert—our construction manager, in one specialized field. Let's see, anybody else?'

Paul found his voice at last. 'You've had the whole thing wrapped up from the start. But why this set-up? Why SHADO, why the secrecy

—why try to put me off the trail, when you *knew* . . .?'

Straker sat erect at his desk. You knew he was a man who would never sprawl, never take it easy, unless he was playing a part for somebody else's benefit. Right now he was playing no part.

He said: 'You tell *me*.'

It was a challenge. They were all attentive.

Paul Foster drew a deep breath. 'You've got proof. Proof that UFOs do come to Earth. And that they're powerful, and dangerous, and unpredictable. And you've had proof for a long time. Right?'

Straker watched him, no muscle betraying any emotion. His eyelashes seemed fixed, frozen.

'People could get scared,' ventured Paul. 'If you haven't got the whole thing sewn up safely—and you can't have, or you wouldn't be involved in all this—then the general public wouldn't much like to know about it. Mass hysteria. Terror. A breakdown of authority. And that wouldn't make it any easier to deal with our friends from . . . from out there, would it?'

'Not bad,' said Colonel Freeman.

He was a seamed, leathery man with a touch of an Australian accent. Physically he looked brawnier and a whole lot tougher than Straker, but it was a different, maybe complementary kind of toughness: where Straker might be the ideal commander because he lived only for the job and had no personal interests, Freeman had lived and still lived with and for human beings—he was fire to Straker's ice. Paul felt that he could talk to Freeman if he needed to. Or if he was ever invited to.

'Hello, Paul.'

The lilt in the voice was unmistakable. Janna came into the office, giving Straker a stiff little nod which was much more impressive, much more deferential than any salute could have been.

She was wearing the uniform he had seen in the control room outside. All part of the pattern, he accepted wearily.

'The leader of Project Foster,' Straker introduced her. 'Operative Janna Wade.'

'Is everybody in London in on the act?' said Paul.

Freeman chuckled. It was hard to believe that Straker would ever allow himself such a luxury.

'It's basically a small team,' said Straker. 'But widespread, for all that. I'm American, but I'm here on English soil.'

'Under it, at this moment,' Freeman observed.

‘Two leading English astronomers have sacrificed lucrative posts here in order to work with our team in Arizona. I’ve got a line to Moscow that takes precedence over any hot line your Prime Minister or our President may want to use.’

‘And still you keep it secret—no leaks ?’

‘No leaks,’ said Straker. He paused, then went on: ‘It’s been a test for you, Foster. You followed a predictable set of clues. You’ve shown a certain initiative, but basically it was an inevitable chain that led you to the studio. And now . . .’ He glanced round the faces of the group. ‘Thank you.’

Silently they filed out of the room, save for Colonel Freeman.

The door closed.

There was only one question left. ‘What happens now?’ Paul asked.

Straker glanced at Freeman, but it was Paul he was talking to. ‘You realize we can never let you go free. You know too much.’

Freeman’s broad shoulders hunched. His worn, pitted face went grim. He said: ‘There must be another way.’

Paul reckoned up his chances of beating up the two of them and making a run for it. The mere notion was pathetic.

‘Could be,’ said Straker. ‘Yes, there could be. SHADO needs men. We’ve been very careful about our recruiting. It takes time, patience . . . and we can’t afford even one disappointment. Not one.’

‘You’re offering me a job?’ Paul’s facetiousness fell flat.

‘We want the right men,’ said Straker. ‘Men able to adapt themselves. Able to command the world’s most advanced submarines, take control of Moonbase in an emergency, hit back fast—because we never get long enough warning of trouble when it’s on its way. It’s no sinecure. Nobody in SHADO ever has it the easy way.’ He looked straight at Paul. ‘You think you could be one of those men, Foster?’

‘I’m ready,’ said Paul, ‘right now.’

‘No, you’re not,’ said Straker, hard as nails. ‘Not by a long way you’re not.’

‘Now look, Straker—’

‘Commander Straker,’ rasped Freeman beside him.

‘Commander Straker—’

‘After the stiffest medical you’ve ever experienced,’ Straker hammered at him, ‘after weeks of computer and psychoanalytical tests . . . after a training course that’ll tear the guts out of you, you might be halfway there.’

‘Well?’ Freeman prompted.

‘I’d like to try,’ said Paul.

‘I thought you might.’

There was no relaxation in the tension, yet Paul sensed that he was accepted. On probation, he thought dourly. After years of being a top boy, right back to the lowest class again. A novice, starting all over again.

Yet he felt an unaccountable exhilaration. He’d always wanted to be where the action was, and there wasn’t going to be any lack of it from now on.

Straker said: ‘He’s all yours, Alec.’

Freeman led Paul to the door. As they crossed the control room, through its barrage of mysterious, winking signals, Paul said:

‘Look, what was all that about Moonbase? I don’t quite—’

‘You’ll learn,’ said Freeman. ‘Oh, you’ll learn.’

5

HE LEARNED. They processed him, tore the guts out of him as Straker had promised they would, scared the living daylights out of him, lectured him and listened to him—only to rip out the underpinnings of his subconscious and show him that he wasn't fit to operate a kid's pedal-car. He had been the fastest, most accomplished test pilot in the business; and they proved humiliatingly to him that compared with what was going on out there in deep space his talents were still in the horse-and-buggy age.

'Don't let it fuzz you,' said Freeman one day. 'We've all been through it. You have to go through it before you can come out the other side.'

It was a throwaway remark, without any real encouragement and without sentimentality. But something in the quirk of Freeman's lower lip told Paul that the score wasn't too demoralizing. They would push him as hard as they could, but already they weren't too unhappy with the results.

He learned. He did day shift and night shift on the monitor panels in HQ control. He held a screwdriver for an electrician, and humbly worked his way through circuit diagrams until he could have done an emergency repair job on a computer deck in thirty seconds flat. He flew beside Alec Freeman in Freeman's baby, the supersonic arrow of an executive jet, and learned off by heart the timetables and routing of freighters from New York to London, Canberra to Hong Kong, Frankfurt to the Orkney Islands. Supplies came in by parachute to waiting submarines or were landed at a supposed private flying club on the Norfolk borders. When there was an emergency, Straker didn't even have to snap his fingers: he raised one eyebrow, and somehow the job was done and no questions asked.

Still Paul had a lot of questions. The more he discovered, the more questions there were.

But he went on learning, sometimes dogged and resentful, sometimes sizzling with impatience for the next step. He wanted to know why SHADO had to bury itself below a film studio, of all things. Surely the surroundings of an airbase, or a battle training ground, would be more appropriate—and a lot better guarded?

'Guards draw attention to a place,' said Freeman patiently. 'And

spies. And demonstrators, every now and then. We like it the way it is. Can you think of a better camouflage than a film company? Any time we need complex equipment or anything really way out, we just wheel it in. The bigger and stranger the load that comes in through the gates, the more the locals shrug their shoulders and say it's just those maniacs at Harlington-Straker getting involved in another expensive flop.'

'And we specialize in flops?'

'Twice we made a profit.' Freeman's jaw acquired a couple of extra, temporary, good-humoured creases. 'Two terrible films—I swear it, really terrible. And they went over big at the box office. Commander Straker was furious.'

'I don't get it.'

'There's no way of accounting for a financial profit in military estimates. It just doesn't happen! They give us a grant, after months of wrangling—and we come up with a dividend. Very embarrassing. But less risky than the chance of someone on an airfield or an ordnance depot showing off to some girlfriend in the village, or even talking in his sleep when the bloke in the next bed is listening.'

'You mean even the military don't really know the full story?'

'I mean we get a handpicked few working with us, and others wondering what the blazes we're up to. We get big allocations, we report to no more than half a dozen big boys with a great mass of gold braid . . . and even then they only know roughly what our policy is. We can't trust 'em. They're only human.'

'And you . . . me . . . the Commander . . .?'

'I talk myself into believing I'm human, now and then,' said Freeman. 'Or anyway, near enough human not to be . . .'

'Not to be what?'

'Alien.'

'It sounds like a dirty word.'

'Until someone gives us reason to think otherwise, it's dirty. They come in here blasting and killing and . . . and somehow getting into our minds. Using us—or maybe preparing to use us.'

'How?'

'We've spent ten years trying to find out. Maybe, Foster, you'll be able to help us.'

Paul Foster said a silent 'Yessir' and went on learning.

Top boy in the stratosphere, he found himself detailed for a tour of duty undersea. He renewed his acquaintance with the fantastic flying

warhead that had once threatened to bring his life to a fiery conclusion.

Skydiver was a combination of shark and vulture that fitted no known specification. If it ever got listed in any technical journal, which was unlikely, several pages would be needed to describe its blend of atomic submarine and manned anti-ballistic missile, the all-purpose destroyer of all time.

Its captain, Peter Carlin, confided to Paul in an off-duty moment that he was glad the deadly vessel had never been used against other human beings, other nations. This amphibious hawk was strictly for the birds—or whatever those flying furies from outer space might be. Nothing land-based could have achieved such mobility, or such secrecy. For ever roving the sea-bed, forever on the alert, it could launch its flying prow in a matter of seconds. From the Atlantic, Pacific or Arctic the supersonic warhead was ready to answer any alarm from overhead or from the far side of the world: in sheer climb or an orbit girdling the world, it would race to meet an intruder from any direction, any angle.

Paul flew ten training missions before being allowed to accompany Carlin himself on a full red alert. He waited to sight a UFO again, knowing that this time nobody was going to laugh or suggest he had his eyes tested. He didn't feel keyed-up: just sure of himself, ready for action, sure of belonging and being up to the job.

Came the let-down. There was no UFO. Not any more. The all-clear came as they sped far above the Chinese coastline.

'Intercepted,' said Carlin. 'Eliminated.' He nodded bland approval. 'Those girls don't let much of the game fly this way—not if they can help it.'

'Girls?'

'On Moonbase. You haven't met them yet?'

'I haven't been allowed up on Moonbase yet,' said Paul stiffly.

'Oh. Wait till that day comes, Paul. They have the prettiest coordinates up there, boy.' Carlin's laugh was rich and throaty. 'They'd shoot any man out of the sky, believe me.'

Peter Carlin was an olive-skinned, little Puerto Rican of Paul's own age. He moved like a dancer; but the dance was a war-dance, the skilful, musical movements of a ju-jitsu expert and remorseless hunter. There was a melancholy in his eyes which could turn to brooding anger for no apparent reason. When Sky 1 broke surface on its seek-and-destroy mission today, his teeth had been bared in the lust of the chase. Now he was relaxed. Something in his mind had automatically switched off just as quickly as it had switched on.

‘Women,’ said Paul tentatively, ‘on Moonbase?‘

‘That worries you?’

‘Well. ..’

‘And a woman in charge,’ said Carlin. ‘Gay Ellis. None better.’ He looped the fighter over in a backbreaking arc and headed back for the ocean, below which an infinitesimal speck of metal waited, drawing them back on beam as surely as a magnet. ‘If you don’t care for the idea, I’d advise you to get used to it. Commander Straker’s a stickler for equality and it’s a levelling up, boy, not a levelling down. That team of Gay’s . . .’ He whistled reflectively. ‘Maybe women are better at that kind of life, in the long term, than men would be. You can get to feel shut-in way up there on the Moon air-conditioned, nowhere you can go for a long walk, everything calculated like a labour-saving kitchen. You begin to think you’re reared on hydroponics like everything else up there. But the girls—they adapt. They make it work. And when a UFO comes past, they turn their minds to that just as neatly as they’d turn ’em to redecorating the sleeping quarters. We didn’t bag that bird today because the girls got him first.’

Paul assimilated this. They were well into the homing parabola, with less than two minutes to go, when he observed that Peter Carlin, letting the automatic pilot do the work, was sitting back and contemplating a photograph stuck to the cockpit wall. It was a sad, nostalgic contemplation.

He caught Paul’s unspoken query and said: ‘My sister.’

‘She’s beautiful.’

It was true. The picture was of a slim, dark model girl with vital, responsive features in place of the usual fashionable mask.

‘She was. Yes, she was.’

There was a silence. Paul broke it. ‘I’m sorry. If it’s something you’d sooner not talk about—’

‘Maybe I want to talk about it. Maybe I want to talk too much. You know,’—Carlin stared at the photograph as though to force a meaning out of it—‘I sometimes feel she’s still . . . alive. I wish I knew. It’s the uncertainty, more than anything, that bugs me.’

Paul waited, not prompting, leaving it to Carlin.

‘I was still in the Navy. I was driving home on leave. When I got about a mile from the house, I saw this sort of glow. And there was a noise. Strange, intense. Like nothing I’d ever heard before.’

‘A UFO?’

‘I didn’t know that at the time. But what else?’

'So . . .'

'So,' said Carlin bitterly, 'I put my foot down, and as I got nearer the house got brighter—like molten metal. I didn't know what it was, I was scared stupid. But I went at it fast.' He didn't take his eyes off the picture. 'Next thing I remember, I was waking up in hospital. They said I'd crashed the car. But I didn't crash that car. Something . . . something took a hold on it, and . . . well, knocked it out of the way. The same something that took my sister.'

'You mean these aliens actually help themselves to—'

'I mean she was there, and then she wasn't there. And there was a man came to investigate. Very quiet about it, not giving anything away. But I knew he knew. I kept on at him until he cracked just a little bit—like a crack in solid ice.'

'Straker,' said Paul.

'Straker. He was able to prove my sister had been in the house right up to those minutes when I was approaching. She'd vanished without a trace.'

'And that's what made you join SHADO.'

'It's one of the reasons. The biggest, maybe.'

The waves grew larger and more real. Suddenly they were engulfed. The brightness of sky and water became a deep, viscous green outside the ports. Sky 1 slowed and swung into position for junction with Diver 1.

SHADO had a formidable armoury. Lunar-based missiles and ground interceptors, submarine and flying predator, hush-hush jets on call within seconds of an alarm sounding; and, Paul discovered during his next theoretical instruction session, a character known as SID—a satellite orbiting the Earth in perpetual opposition to the Moon, containing the Space Intruder Detector, the most sophisticated computer yet assembled. The automobiles which rolled in and out of the gates of Harlington-Straker studios were usually smart, but always smarter under the bonnet than their sleek exteriors led the passer-by to believe.

The control room operatives, too, were formidable. Sealed away from the outside world as though in some aseptic engine-room, they dressed lightly and moved easily with movements that stirred Paul's imagination. But when, reporting back after a gruelling morning in a gymnasium on the other side of London, he tried to chat one up, she brushed him off neatly, politely, and with a far-out indifference that made him feel like an awkward adolescent again.

'Dehydrated,' he muttered resentfully to himself. All of them the

same: so devoted to the job that they had lost all human feelings, all warmth.

Yet when Alec Freeman sauntered through they would grin, fence with him in a duel of good-humoured insult, and occasionally nod acceptance of a date.

What it amounted to was that Paul wasn't accepted yet. He wasn't one of them. He still had a long way to go.

Right, if that was how it had to be. All right. He'd go the whole way. He'd show the lot of them.

6

ALEC FREEMAN perched on the edge of the desk in the deserted office and opened the cigarette box. He was in a mood for fooling the box. Nothing like carrying out a special test to prove that even the most delicate machinery was fallible. Give Louis and his little gang something to fret about.

In a plummy, affected tone he recited: 'But soft. What light through yonder window breaks? It is the East, and Juliet is the sun.'

There was a brief pause, then the impersonal voice said: 'Voice Print Identification positive nine-seven. Freeman, Alec E.'

Freeman sighed and waited for the room to descend.

Silver-blonde heads turned to nod a respectful welcome as he crossed the control room. All except for one head which nodded not quite so respectfully: the girl remembered last night . . . and so did Freeman.

He went on into Commander Straker's office.

Straker was in uniform. Freeman had known him and worked with him for a long time now, and once or twice had thought they could be regarded as friends. But when he saw the Commander in that starkly aluminium uniform, gleaming under the chin and sharpening up those bony facial lines, he wasn't so sure. Straker was first and foremost a brilliant mathematical device, as skilled and impersonal as anything out in the control room or up on Moonbase. You didn't make friends, in any real human sense, with a calculating machine, even when it was convincingly covered over with flesh and blood.

Straker's head was bowed over a sheaf of papers.

'New boy shaping up all right?' he asked without raising his head.

'He'll do fine. A bit impatient at the moment. Wants to get ahead faster.'

'The waiting'll do him good. Though I must say, there are times when my own patience . . .'

Straker bit off the words and pressed a button on his desk. The television screen set into the wall came alive—if you could use such a word in connection with a scene of such devastation.

Freeman's heart sank. 'That's Westbrook Electronics, isn't it?'

‘What’s left of it.’

‘What happened?’

‘I give you three guesses.’

Freeman stared at the all-too-vivid picture of the factory complex that was now only heaps of rubble. Whatever had hit Westbrook had hit it hard.

For ten years they had setbacks, one after another. Grimly they had weathered them all. The UFOs had made their original sorties with impunity, and it was a mercy there had been so few of them at first. As the pace stepped up, so did the defence screen. Now, with SHADO fully geared up for action from its subterranean and submarine stations, and with Moonbase fully operational since early this year, the visitors from outer space could be assured of a hot reception. But still they could sneak through if they came in fast enough, from certain angles, unpredictably. Long-range detection was still not good enough; and continuous tracking could be ruined by sunspot conditions, alien jamming, the tiniest of human errors.

The Westbrook Utronic equipment was to have been the answer. Now the answer was shot to pieces.

‘How do they *know?*’ he fumed. ‘Do they read our minds—do they have other ways of infiltrating that we don’t even know about yet?’

‘I’ll add that to my list,’ said Straker bleakly.

‘Your list?‘

‘The list of questions I’m dying to ask one of these creatures when we finally get round to meeting one. Ten years, and we still don’t know who they are, what they are, what they’re made of.’

‘Not sugar and spice, that’s for sure.’ Freeman wrenched his gaze away from the dispiriting acres of destruction.

‘What’s next?’

‘You fly to Los Angeles.’

Freeman shrugged. When the boss said you flew, you flew. If he felt like giving an explanation, he’d give one; if not, not.

Straker went on: ‘There’s one bit of good news. Just one.’

‘I’ll make the most of it, whatever it is.’

‘The Utronic equipment is safe. It wasn’t in the building. It’s intact, fully tested, ready for shipment. We’ve got the teeth; soon we’ll have the eyes.’

‘You want me to fetch them?’

‘The equipment and the design team are ready to be picked up in Los Angeles and flown to England. I’m making you personally

responsible for the security of the entire operation.'

'Right.'

'You'll be glad of the exercise.'

'I shouldn't wonder,' said Freeman.

Seagull X-Ray was a dream. It was quite a while since Alec Freeman had been at the controls of a supersonic transport, but coordination of controls, hands and feet, eyes and ears came back as naturally as if he were riding a bicycle: though he had to admit it was even longer since he had ridden a bicycle.

They dropped gently towards Stevenson Airbase. He lowered the snoot, and the runway opened up straight ahead. There was the gentlest nudge of ground under the wheels, and then the roar of the reverse thrust. The co-pilot nodded respectful acknowledgement.

'SHADO control,' Freeman intoned. 'Seagull X-Ray. Confirm arrival 0835. Takeoff scheduled 1100 hours.'

'Roger, Seagull X-Ray.'

First stage completed, thought Freeman. Quick loading, quick turnaround, and the next stage was in the hands of HQ. Quick flight home, and shipment of the Utronic device up to Moonbase. All the calculations had been done. Assembly and operating instructions were already in the hands of Gay Ellis on Moonbase. All nice and neat and tidy.

Provided a UFO didn't just happen to get in the way.

Climbing down from the plane, Freeman was nagged by his own query. Did the aliens have some form of extrasensory perception, some telepathic awareness of every step planned against them, every barrier set up?

If they had this or some other inexplicable source of information, the precious cargo could be in trouble. The flight back from Los Angeles was the most critical part of the journey. A supersonic transport flying at Mach 4 was a pretty tempting target.

If I were the opposition, thought Freeman sombrely, that's what I'd go for.

He communicated none of his forebodings to the crew or to the team of experts waiting to hand over the equipment. Loading was swiftly accomplished under the supervision of a hatchet-faced man in civilian clothes who would have looked much more at ease in battledress. There was a last-minute threat of a delay: caught in a thunderstorm, the helicopter carrying the project engineer, designer and Westbrook divisional manager arrived late. Freeman was already

chafing at the controls when the party was hustled across the apron and into the plane.

At 1100 hours precisely they skimmed along the runway and climbed towards the stratosphere.

When he had levelled off, Freeman handed over to the co-pilot. If he was going to be personally responsible for the whole thing, he'd better familiarize himself with the distinguished passengers.

Kurt Mahler was the dominating figure in the plush and plastic of the well-equipped lounge. He was small but impressive, with a broad head and dark brown eyes—unresting, forever curious, probing eyes.

'Welcome aboard,' said Freeman. 'We've been waiting for this day—it could be more historic than most of mankind know right now. The breakthrough we've all been waiting for.'

'Thank you, Colonel.' They shook hands.

'I'd like to congratulate you and your team.'

'My team? Yes. But we would have got nowhere without the . . . how shall I put it? . . . without a push in the right direction. You must meet our chief designer.'

Freeman turned towards the lean man seated across the aisle. But Mahler was saying:

'Virginia Lake.'

'How do you do, Colonel?'

She was in her late twenties, she was calm and sure of herself; and she was very beautiful. A designer? Fashion designer, you'd have said. Freeman reached out gladly to shake hands with her, and found her fingers long and cool and smooth.

'For the first time in my career,' he said, 'I wish I was flying subsonic aircraft.'

'How come?'

'The trip would take so much longer.'

'Just in case anyone's interested,' said the other man, 'I'm Phil Wade.'

Freeman made conventional noises and shook hands, but settled into the seat beside Virginia Lake. She really was the answer to any man's prayers—and he wasn't thinking about her as a technician.

She jolted him back to drab reality. 'Would you like to see the Utronic equipment?'

'Not right now.'

'We've got the basic control deck right over there. Very compact.'

‘Very,’ said Freeman without sparing it a glance.

‘The underlying theory—’

‘I’m familiar with it,’ Freeman assured her.

‘Familiar? Really?’

‘Quite familiar.’ He edged a few inches closer, so that her shoulder rested against his. ‘For instance, I know that a Utronic beam travels instantaneously.’

‘Almost instantaneously.’

‘Near enough.’ He looked hopefully into her eyes. The response was a laughing blue deeper than the cloudless sky outside. ‘You can bend it, like a laser only ten times more flexible, with less energy loss, faster response. So we’ll be able to detect UFOs even when they’re flying many times the speed of light in deep space.’

‘That’s the general idea.’

‘Which means fewer of them will get close to Earth. Our Moonbase interceptors stand a better chance of getting at them first.’

‘Glad to be of service.’

‘I could tell you even more over dinner,’ Freeman suggested.

‘Hadn’t you better get back to your little seat up front?’

‘I guess so.’ He let his hand stray over hers.

Musingly she said: ‘Colonel Freeman . . .’

‘Yes?’

‘You were right. You *are* familiar . . . with the equipment.’

He was reluctant to tear himself away. Ignoring the knowing smirk of the nearby Phil Wade, he went back to the flight deck. He had forgotten about possible danger from a roving UFO; forgotten about telepathy and any other kind of freakishness from outer space. His main concern at the moment was to work out a way of seeing Virginia Lake as often as possible between her arrival at HQ and her return to the States. Straker of course would expect her to devote every waking second to work. Freeman would persuade her different.

He settled back into his seat. ‘Everything OK?’

‘No trouble at all.’

‘Good.’

Now, he thought, let’s get this campaign worked out. She’s bound to be given accommodation in . . .

‘Seagull X-Ray.’ The metallic voice was urgent, peremptory. ‘SHADO control here.’

‘Blast.’ His train of thought wasn’t one he cared to have interrupted.

‘UFO sighted. Approaching North Atlantic. We must assume your aircraft is the target.’

The girl slid from his mind. He rapped out questions, got the answers. Reduce height, make best use of cloud cover. Meteorological readings? They came, he checked; prepared to divert course.

They’d have to reduce speed. But in dense atmosphere, so would the UFO unless it wanted to burn itself up. And if the UFO slowed down, that improved SHADO’s chances of interception.

He flicked a switch. ‘Fasten your seat belts.’

They’d be asking questions now. When he had a moment, he would go back to reassure them. If he had a moment.

He could have done with some reassurance himself, right now.

He hoped the rest of them were wide awake. Up there on the Moon, down under the waves, down in SHADO control: he hoped, he just hoped they wouldn’t miss *this* one.

7

SID HAD spotted the speeding particle far out, coming in on an unwavering line which bisected the distance between the satellite and SHADO HQ. This meant it would put the Earth between itself and the Moon; but would not be entirely out of range of the lunar interceptors, if they struck at the right moment. The detector's scanners spun, collected the deadly message, and predicted a North Atlantic entry at a spot where the slower trace of Seagull X-Ray's path would intersect. And that was not, could not possibly be, just a coincidence in the other sense of the word.

Standby on Moonbase became a yellow alert. A course correction pulsed in. Red alert.

The astronauts on duty tensed, waiting to leap into the chutes which would deliver them into the interceptor craft.

Under the Atlantic, Peter Carlin settled into the nose cone of Skydiver and waited for lift-off orders. They were close to the surface, shortening the attack distance by a pathetic few fathoms, straining at the leash.

'Blow tanks one through six.'

'Aye aye, sir.'

Now there was only the thinnest film of water between them and the upper world.

Carlin studied the blobs on the screen in front of him. There was a cluster of shipping some way off, and one vessel setting a course that was closer than he could have wished.

'Intruder entering visual speed range.' Outer space became inner space, became Earth's own atmosphere. The voice from Control stayed unemotional but the flat statement was like a monstrously amplified siren. 'Radar and visual alert. Skydiver . . .'

A mush of interference blanketed the voice for a moment. Carlin swore. The screen blurred and then cleared, and one spot was too unreasonably bright and steady, and a lot too close. He had to make a quick decision. He made it. Skydiver's nose went down, and they were heading for the seabed. Back in Diver 1 there would probably be some bruised shoulders and elbows.

'Skydiver . . .!' Now the message was emotional, urgent. 'What are

you playing at? Report position. What the—'

'Skydiver,' said Carlin, bracing his feet as he stabilized the craft and checked the radar blips again. 'Skydiver to Control. We had to crash-dive to avoid a surface vessel.'

'What kind of vessel?'

'Probably a freighter. They wouldn't be too happy to see a futuristic submarine. Or a detachable flying fish whizzing about their ear holes. Right?'

'Right. But make a fast detour. Out and round it—and fast. Our friend's coming in fit to scorch his fins. Round and out—and *up*! You read me?'

'I read you,' said Carlin.

He thumbed the panel for full speed ahead. Too bad if half the fish in the Atlantic had nervous breakdowns. He had a rendezvous with something nasty from out of a far-distant vacuum.

The blips receded. When he surfaced, it was on a rolling plateau of unbroken ocean.

Now the signal on the screen was a jabbing, frantic signpost.

'Stand by,' snapped Carlin into his mike, 'for lift-off.'

Sky 1 shed Diver 1 like a lunar rocket contemptuously shedding a burnt-out fuel stage. Water streamed from its body, and then it was slanting up into the sky.

Carlin's lips drew back from his teeth.

This time, he prayed: *this* time . . .

He forced himself to keep his voice steady as he said: 'SHADO control from Sky 1. Airborne. Position zero two zero. Red.'

'Roger.'

The earth reeled away below them. The sun teetered away to one side, far off there was the vapour trail of some innocent, uncommitted aircraft. Somewhere not so far away there ought to be Seagull X-Ray.

He switched the scrambler into circuit and said, to the illimitable blue sky: 'Sky 1 to Seagull X-Ray. Where are you? Over.'

There was a pause, then a click, and a rustle of breath. Freeman might have been sitting next to him, breathing down his neck.

'Peter, am I glad to hear you. What's your position?'

'Send me a signal and I'll tell you.'

Light whipped across the screen. Carlin did a steep turn and established a sweet little railway of parallel lines.

'These clouds,' Freeman was growling, 'give about as much cover as

the G-string on a belly dancer. Peter, where *are* you?'

'Right above you,' said Carlin, sounding calmer than he felt. 'Keeping you warm, at 20,000.'

'Warm? I'd sooner be kept cool.'

They were both suspended in nothingness. The azure backdrop was a void of peaceful eternity. Carlin couldn't see Seagull and he couldn't see the UFO. It was only when his gaze dropped to the screen that he read danger in every flick of light. The UFO was in range, and closing rapidly.

He said: 'Seagull—I'd advise ten degrees port, and a fast dive. Give me more room to manoeuvre.'

'Down we go,' said Freeman. 'If you see our stomachs around, you might pick 'em up in passing.'

One bright spot described an agonizingly slow arc.

Another one kept coming, came unwaveringly on. Peter Carlin stared straight into the sun. A muted orange halo shimmered around the seething floodlight of it, centred in his observation window. And then there was a dot in the middle of it, not a sunspot and not a shred of dust or eyelash in his own eye, but something real and solid and purposeful.

It spun down towards that stretch of the heavens across which Seagull X-Ray was moving. Light sparked off the two contra-rotating bands and stub wings which carried it on, tilted it, turned it for its annihilating descent.

Peter Carlin took a good look. He wanted to memorize it, to know it once and for all. To memorize . . . because if he had his way, it wasn't going to be there much longer.

Carlin turned to converge.

Light suddenly blotted out the sun. There was a thunderclap which seemed to tear the metal of Sky 1 apart, and a holocaust of flame ripping through the heavens, dying just as suddenly in the rarefied atmosphere.

Carlin fought to retain control. His practised eye skimmed the panel. Needles shivered, and two warning lights came on, then went out again. A near miss. The UFO might be concentrating on Seagull X-Ray, but it had not failed to notice the presence of Sky 1.

The skimming invader was far below now, sinking into a cotton wool haze.

Carlin reported: 'UFO entered cloud layer. Watch it, Seagull. Watch it!'

‘Roger,’ said Freeman.

Carlin went in pursuit. They were all three of them too close together. No civil airline pilots would ever have allowed themselves to move so fast within such a small area. But there was nothing civil about this. No, indeed, thought Peter Carlin. He glanced at the photograph tacked to the wall. Leila was still there, never ageing. Her face would always be there, always the same, just as it was in the terrifying, lost corners of his mind. He had almost forgotten what she sounded like, how they’d laughed together and how she’d introduced her girl friends to him and then warned him off them—or warned them off him—and how he had kept men away from her because none of them was good enough for his sister, not one of them, not yet; but her face and expression he would never forget. Between them there had been loyalty and love and laughter. Whoever had taken it away deserved what was coming to him. Him . . . or *it?*

Sky 1 shrieked down the sky. The trace was steady and unmistakable on the screen. Clouds whipped round the ports, but Carlin could see through the thickest fog with his electronic gaze.

He fired.

And then they were clear of the cloud bank. Below, the UFO was sliding away out of control. It seemed for one moment of infinity to hang suspended above the sea, and then surrendered and fell. The sea erupted into a boiling mass. Steam rose, seethed, and was flushed through with a mounting, writhing skein of fiendish purple light.

Carlin said harshly: ‘Intruder intercepted. Attacked. Eliminated.’

Commander Ed Straker had been standing motionless before the main console. Nobody had dared speak to him other than to announce facts and figures. Feed in the items and watch him shape up the programme for himself; and don’t expect him to smile or to wince, whatever happened.

Only once did he show any emotion. They heard Carlin shout something, heard a hissing wave of static over the transmitter, and then there was a jumble of voices and a silence. It was in the silence that everything happened: had to happen then, when nobody had any time to talk. In the silence that Straker’s fists clenched slowly until his knuckles went as white as a skeleton.

‘Verify Colonel Freeman still on course,’ he said once.

The reply was immediate. ‘I’ve aged about five years, but we’re still in one piece.’

‘Sky 1 . . .’ Then Straker brusquely countermanded his own order.

‘No. Cancel. Leave it to him. We’ll . . . wait.’

They waited; until finally it came, the message confirming interception, attack, elimination. Nobody in the control room sighed or cheered. It wasn’t a game; or, if it was, there were still some years to play before victory was in sight.

Carlin was transmitting again. ‘Started to break up on impact. Wreckage everywhere. Wouldn’t go much on chances of salvage. I’d say . . .’ There was silence, then: ‘Just a minute. Hold it.’

Straker still did not move.

Carlin said: ‘There’s a body.’

The duty supervisor glanced at Straker. He reached out and took over the panel. ‘Confirm. Please confirm. Did you say . . . A body?’

‘Yes. A body.’

Straker said: ‘Go in and get it. Keep your camera going full record. But above all—get that body and bring it back.’

‘Roger. Will do.’

‘Control to Seagull X-Ray. ETA confirmation, please.’

‘Working on it,’ came Freeman’s response. ‘Making due allowance for . . . um . . . unexpected turbulence.’

Alec Freeman was not a great one for using his feet. If there were wheels or wings to transport him anywhere he wanted to go, then that suited him fine. Country walks were all right for some. For Freeman, the rock garden which had been used in two Harlington-Straker feature films and one cheap-budget television series was a wide open space; Hyde Park was enough to give him agoraphobia; and one of his main reasons for leaving Australia was the way it simply went on and on, and the way open-air enthusiasts still talked romantically about the walkabout. For Alec Freeman, romance meant beautifully designed cars, beautifully designed aircraft, and beautifully designed women.

Nevertheless, for once in his life he grew almost sentimental about solid ground beneath his feet. Up there in Seagull X-Ray he had felt too exposed. At any moment there could have been a cosmic clobbering around the head. A flash, a bang—and an awfully long way to fall.

London felt good, sounded good, smelt good.

He went into action without delay. The Utronic equipment was transhipped in less than an hour, duplicate circuit diagrams were enclosed just in case the Moonbase personnel had got their first set upside-down, and out went the night flight, the faintest wisp of a

phantom meteor across the sky. Maybe one or two amateur astronomers would record it and try to prove a point or two. To most observers it would appear as no more than a watery trickle off the Milky Way.

And that left him more time in which to entertain Virginia Lake.

It was with a virtuous feeling of accomplishment, of having done well by humanity in general and one individual human being in particular, that he reported to Commander Straker.

'Spaceborne?' asked Straker tersely.

'Positively floating,' said Freeman.

Straker studied him, then indicated the small, tidy array of bottles which added a splash of colour to the office. 'You look tired. Have a drink.'

Was there a tinge of mockery behind the remark? You could never tell; would probably never be able to tell.

'I think I will,' said Freeman. 'And you?' He knew the answer, supplied it. 'No, you never touch it.'

'Self-control,' said Straker.

'Maybe drinking needs more self-control.'

It was a point worth arguing, he thought. A nice intellectual way of passing a few entertaining minutes.

But Straker's mind was back on the job. 'Every detail checked? Everything on schedule?'

'Everything's fine.' Freeman rubbed his eyes and suppressed a yawn. Yes, he was tired all right. Too much concentration. Trying to accomplish too much, that was the trouble—to satisfy Straker, himself, and of course the delectable Miss Lake. 'Moonbase and all other tracker stations will have the Utronic system fitted and operational within a week.'

'Not bad,' Straker conceded. 'Not bad.'

'Thanks.' Freeman swirled the liquid in the tumbler. 'And when does . . . it . . . arrive?'

'Any time now.'

'We've had to wait quite a while for this one.'

'Ten years,' said Straker. He was staring into space, into a haunted chasm beyond time, into the past or future or both. 'A decade of uncertainties. Deaths and denials, speculation and cheap laughs, official negligence and official condemnation, and evasions and penny-pinching. And how far have we progressed?'

'You've done a good job,' said Freeman. He found it difficult to pay

a compliment; as difficult as the ramrod Straker found it to accept one. But the truth was the truth. ‘The best,’ he said. ‘No medals, and you won’t live to collect the pension—but you’ve done the best there is.’

Almost spurning the testimony, Straker grated: ‘What do we know about the UFOs? Really know about them, I mean: what are they . . . where do they come from . . . what do they want?’

They had been over it so often before. Freeman wondered, with a sag of defeatism, if they would have this same conversation every month, every week, from now for another ten years and beyond.

The intercom buzzed.

‘Yes?’ Straker sounded alert, relieved to be dealing with something definite and official rather than with vague speculation.

‘Mayland Hospital. SHADO Section. Your special patient has arrived, sir. We propose to use underground corridor number 32 to SHADO medical centre.’

‘Thank you.’ Straker switched off and looked at Freeman.

Freeman said: ‘Maybe they’re bringing in some of the answers now.’

‘Want to come and find out?’

Freeman did not trust himself to answer. He fell into step three or four paces behind Straker, and they went out into the labyrinth of passages. Straker did not falter. He knew every step of the way: he had laid down the basic principles for the whole complex system and had paced out its subterranean miles a thousand times over. Maybe when all this was over, when the UFOs ceased to come or when their secret had been solved and their menace nullified, when there was no need for SHADO and the consoles and computers were still and dark, Straker would go on living a hermit’s life down here, perambulating along the deserted corridors, mechanically going through the motions over and over again.

Corridor 32 was blocked by a massive door, surmounted by an illuminated panel. ‘Condition Sterile’ said the bright, winking lettering.

Straker knew the short cuts. They had arrived ahead of the incoming party. It was announced by the faint purr of trolley wheels along a side passage. Freeman felt his breath flutter in his throat as the trolley and its shrouded, inanimate burden turned the corner. He wanted to drag the attendants away from the trolley, to peer into the face of . . . of what?

It slowed beside them. The alien was still encased in a spacesuit, with helmet and translucent faceplate not so very different from those

worn by human beings on the Moon or servicing the detector satellite. But the features were indistinct: there appeared to be a thick green fluid swirling around inside the helmet, and vision was further impaired by a plastic shell erected on the trolley, giving additional protection from the outside atmosphere.

Peter Carlin followed the trolley like a mourner plodding behind a bier. He looked haggard. He had come a long way with this priceless capture—and had allowed himself no rest.

Straker acknowledged his salute, and then snapped out the words: 'Well done'.

Carlin could do no more than nod. He was close to exhaustion. But still he wanted to stay awake, to be around; to know all there was to know, as soon as it was there to be known.

'Right,' said Straker. 'You've been to debriefing?'

'Not yet, sir. I came straight here.'

'Better go now, then.'

'But, sir—'

'Debriefing,' said Straker. 'You know regulations.'

Carlin's weary features drooped even further, but he drew himself upright and said: 'Yessir'. He turned and went off along the interminable corridor, without once looking back.

Freeman watched him go. He could imagine quite a few of the thoughts that were simmering in that mind.

Straker said: 'What's the position, Doctor? Is he . . . it . . . alive?'

'Alive, yes. But in critical condition.'

'It's got to live,' said Straker. 'Got to. Got to be kept alive.'

They went on into the medical wing.

8

TWO SURGEONS were scrubbing up. Through the observation window into the operating theatre Freeman saw a nurse, waiting, and a man in green uniform checking electrical leads to an operating table. On this side of the screen a console controlled a monitor screen and the report dials of a diagnostic computer. The teamwork was that of the highest human skills and the swiftest electronic collation of information.

Straker said: 'Just what are the chances of survival? How long have we got?'

'Impossible to estimate.' Shroeder, one of the surgeons, glanced at the clock. 'First we must try to effect normal respiration. At the moment he's breathing an oxygenated liquid.'

'Liquid?'

'His helmet's full of it. So, from what we can make out, are his lungs.'

It came as no great surprise. Freeman had sat in on many a long-winded discussion of the aliens' possible environment and the probable qualities of their physique which would enable them to travel through space and into Earth's atmosphere at such devastating speed. Many an expert had advanced the theory that they must be lapped in a liquid environment.

The trolley stood by the door.

Shroeder said: 'Theatre staff ready? Check.'

'Check.' The response was immediate.

Straker stepped towards the trolley, trying to peer through the translucent cover.

'You must please stand back,' said Shroeder.

'If we could come in—'

'Out of the question. When we remove the protective cover there could be danger of infection. Of many things. We don't know what alien micro-organisms he may be carrying. Or of what you might communicate to *him*.'

Freeman marvelled at the way in which Straker moved deferentially to one side. He knew the Commander's impatience, knew how it was gnawing at him—and still there was no glint of it through that

authoritarian mask. Yet he must be repeating to himself what he had said only a few minutes ago: *It's got to live. Got to . . .*

They stationed themselves at the observation window as the incalculable, inhuman patient was wheeled in and the medical team stiffened in readiness.

The monitor screen showed a close-up of the creature's face as the cover came away.

Within its goldfish bowl of a helmet, the head had very much the dimensions of a normal terrestrial head. Lips and skin were green, blurred by the greenish liquid. The eyes were shut.

Shroeder nodded to his assistant. Two of them, man and nurse, began to free the fastenings of the helmet. Another nurse held a tube, ready to step in when the liquid was released.

Freeman tried to imagine what it must be like to be that creature on the operating table. Did it think the same, feel the same, as we did? Perhaps to be freed of that cocoon of liquid would be agony—as deadly and as terrifying as drowning. The alien could choke, could go into convulsions like a landed fish, could simply pass out in a split second.

They just didn't know. It was the first chance they'd had of finding out.

It's got to live . . .

The green fluid seeped out from under the helmet, then flowed with a rush into the vessel neatly swung into position. It bubbled up from the lungs and emerged like a viridian vomit from between the fleshless lips. When the last trickle had ceased, the nurse inserted the tube into the alien's mouth.

Shroeder bent over the head, and delicately raised one of the reptilian eyelids. He remained utterly still for a moment, examining the eye, then with an unwavering hand removed a plastic cover from the eyeball.

Freeman turned away. He needed a cigarette.

'They'll be hours yet,' he said. 'Maybe we should go and pour some liquid into ourselves?'

'You go,' said Straker.

'I forgot. No surgical spirit for you?'

'You didn't forget,' said Straker, matter-of-fact. 'You just keep needling—I wonder why?'

Freeman did not reply. He went out, lit a cigarette, went along to the control room and tried to persuade himself that he could be of

some good here. The hours ticked away. Twice he went back to the observation window and found Straker still there, still unrelenting, still silently demanding that the alien should live . . . and talk.

And what kind of language would he talk, when it came to it? The chances of their being able to communicate in anything better than a primitive sign-language or light squiggles on an electronic blackboard were remote.

Unless the alien really were telepathic.

Freeman wasn't sure he would welcome that. If the aliens' mind-waves were in the same order as their heat-ray murder weapons, human brains were going to take a mighty pounding.

He went back yet again just as Shroeder and his assistant were taking off their masks outside the operating theatre.

'He's alive?' Straker was giving an order rather than asking a question.

'Yes,' said Shroeder.

'And . . .?'

'The general analysis has shown he is basically humanoid. General characteristics much the same as those of a man.'

'A man,' breathed Freeman.

'More or less,' said Shroeder with professional caution. 'Body temperature three degrees paranormal. Blood pressure rather low. Muscular development poor.'

'Because of time spent in space, or intrinsically poor?' asked Straker.

'At this stage I'm not prepared to pronounce on that. The cranium, incidentally, is ten per cent larger than our average. It would be interesting to know how fully the different areas of the brain are employed within that cover.'

'I have a nasty feeling,' murmured Freeman, 'that there's full employment.'

Straker paid no attention. He said: 'What else?'

'The skin has a green coloration which may well be artificial. We can't make a snap judgement. It may be due simply to absorption from the liquid. We're waiting—'

'Waiting?' It was the first sign that Straker was on edge, teetering on the brim. 'Waiting for what?'

'For the first electro-medical results.'

The alien was framed, supine, in the oblong of the observation window. It was difficult to think of it as a fellow being—he, she, or it. Electro bio-sensors made a mesh over the skin and face; the body,

arms and head seemed to be feeding an impersonal monster of greedy microcircuits.

A man, thought Freeman, trying to give the whole thing a real, personal context. A man from a solar system that might be like ours or might be unlike; a man from maybe a hundred million million miles away.

Aliens go home!

He laughed silently, mirthlessly.

The computer spewed a print-out the way the alien had, some hours ago, spewed green fluid. Shroeder turned to check it. He shook his head, disbelieving.

'Well?' rapped Straker.

'I don't believe there could be such a parallel. Not such an exact one.'

'A little more explicit, please.'

'It's early to be sure,' said Shroeder, as infuriatingly meticulous as ever, 'but these preliminary tests appear to show organ and gland transplants. Human tissue. Heart, liver, left lung, thyroid.'

Straker stared at the monitor screen. Then he flicked a switch so that the operating lights came on above the alien, and there on the screen was a clear picture of the face, unimpeded by cover or helmet. The green angular features were smooth-skinned, unwrinkled: not so much placid as devoid of emotion, drained of life.

Yet the creature was still alive.

Straker turned to Freeman. 'You realize what this could mean?'

'Our whole world, our whole way of life, duplicated billions of miles away in another galaxy, another range of the cosmos?'

'That's a theory. I'll leave that one to the philosophers. No, what gets me is the little equation we've got right in front of us. Ten years of UFO incidents—fact and guesswork. Fact. And the fact is that on a number of fully documented occasions, we've found mutilated bodies after confirmed UFO attacks. Violence—for the sake of violence, to scare people, to release some sadistic impulse? Or . . . to take on supplies, the way any invader takes supplies from the country it's infiltrating?'

'Supplies?'

'Those mutilated bodies,' said Straker. 'There were nearly always organs missing. Recorded as mutilation: maybe theft would have been a better description. The first alien we lay our hands on shows human organ transplants.'

The computer released another message, and produced a priority buzz that brought Shroeder swinging round on his heels. Before he could release it, a nurse's voice throbbed gently through the amplifier. 'Dr Shroeder. Emergency.'

The door opened, closed. Straker stared at it, then stared through the window. The group re-formed around the prone figure.

'Doesn't look too good,' said Freeman aloud. The words represented at most one-hundredth of what he was thinking.

Straker thumbed the console controls, and Shroeder's voice flooded in.

'. . . and an H and K unit in here immediately.'

'Yessir.' The nurse was transmitting a top priority call.

Straker leaned forward, willing the alien to live.

To live, mused Freeman, so that we can take the poor wretch apart bit by bit. Poor wrench? . . . after what *they* had done to the human beings they'd pounced on, after the fear they could cause, the unknown horrors they could unleash if they weren't held back . . .?

But the terror now was only one individual, lying on an operating table, fighting for its life.

'Cancel that request,' said Shroeder suddenly and quietly. All the urgency was gone. 'Cessation,' he pronounced.

The nurse looked up and met Straker's gaze through the glass. Close to the control microphone, she said: 'I'm afraid he's dead, sir.'

The face in vivid focus on the screen began to sag. Tiny fissures appeared like those in mud under a scorching sun. Freeman winced involuntarily. He seemed to be watching a young man age in a matter of seconds. The smooth, unresponsive features became those of an old, old man.

Shroeder, too, looked old and haggard when at last, after going through full decontamination procedure, he emerged from the theatre.

'It was asking a lot,' he said.

'When can I have a post-mortem report?' asked Straker.

'Forty-eight hours.'

'Make it twenty-four.' Straker was casual, but meant precisely what he said. 'Not every last little detail. Just what really matters.'

Freeman was in the office when the report came through. He had hardly been out of the office. It was not that Straker had anything to say to him: there was an almost unbroken silence between them; but even Straker needed someone around to alleviate the bitterness of the

disappointment. They had had one of the enemy in their grasp at last; and then finally he had eluded them.

Shroeder himself brought the report. He hung about for ten minutes waiting to be questioned before he understood that Straker was not ready to ask questions or make decisions. Not yet. The surgeon left. Freeman stayed.

After reading each sheet, Straker passed it over.

When he had finished, he put his head in his hands but made no sound. After brooding for several minutes he sat back and said:

'The rapid ageing isn't well documented enough. We can't be sure at this stage exactly why it happened. But it's a fair guess that it's connected with the reaction of Earth's atmosphere on the metabolism, once the body is released from its protective fluid. What was that bit on the second page—or was it the third?'

Freeman walked round the desk and spread the sheets out again. Straker pored over them. Living flesh and blood would have been so much more rewarding than mere notes.

The fact that the lungs were filled with oxygenated liquid indicated a cushioning safeguard against phenomenal acceleration and fantastic speeds over a long period. Long enough for the skin to pick up a green coloration if that were not already its natural hue. It all added up to the likelihood of an extended journey through space, perhaps travelling for months at many times the speed of light.

'Who *are* they?' demanded Straker.

The question had been asked more times than Freeman cared to remember during the past decade. The only answer so far was that they were a pretty ruthless and pretty clever bunch, in science and technology some hundred years in advance of man.

'But all this'—Straker tapped the report—tells us is that in themselves they're frail. A dying race.' He read from one paragraph. 'Hereditary sterility evident. Speedy decay of exposed tissue. Elements in blood and in recovered fluid indicate use of drugs which are so far unidentified. Not within our range. Drugs and advanced transplant techniques to beat the natural ageing progress.'

'But no indication of what an average lifespan would be for them—average in our own terminology, I mean.'

'No,' Straker agreed. 'Their relationship with us . . . Look, they're highly intelligent, so they come to Earth presumably knowing the risk of contact with our atmosphere. Why do they come?'

'Theft.' Freeman shivered. 'Isn't that how you put it?'

The report listed five major organ and gland transplants. Five, in

one body. In the case of the heart, tissue compatibility proved it was human in origin. One of the reasons that lured the aliens here was their need for replacement organs. But there might be others. Freeman imagined a dying planet in some distant solar system, its natural resources nearly exhausted, its inhabitants sterile, doomed to extinction. It was a situation which Earth itself might have to face one day. But right now Earth was, according to the standards of the aliens, a lush pasture: it was abundant, fertile, an ideal source to satisfy their needs. Maybe they looked upon Earth without animosity but with simple callousness, just as human beings looked to the animal kingdom for food.

'It would appear,' said Straker, 'that they are driven by circumstance across uncountable miles of space, urged on by the greatest force in the Universe.' He uttered the words as though they were merely part of another theorem, to be once there was a whisper of awe in his tone as he summed up: 'Survival!'

They had had enough of the office. By some intuitive, unspoken agreement they left it together and paced along the corridors, inspecting the control room and the powerhouse as though the discipline of everyday routine would soothe away all the unsolved problems. Once again Freeman had a vision of Straker's ghost haunting, these corridors right through eternity.

As they passed Medical Centre, a girl operative hurried out with a slip of paper. She snapped to attention in front of the Commander and handed him the paper. He read it the way a camera takes a picture, with one flick of the shutter, assimilating everything at one gulp.

'There's no possible doubt?'

'None, sir. Electronic tissue analysis is as positive as a voice print.'

'Yes.' There was no hint of irony or reproof. 'I do understand that. I just wanted . . .'

Straker let it trail away, shook his head gravely, and walked on. Freeman caught him up. They completed their circuit, and reached the office door again. When they were inside, Straker operated the lift mechanism and they rose to the surface.

Miss Ealand, his secretary, came in as soon as the signal confirming repositioning reached her.

'Captain Carlin has been waiting for a word with you, sir.'

'Here?' Straker frowned.

'He has an appointment to discuss casting of a new film with a Mexican setting.' She answered his frown with a faint smile.

'Yes. Of course.'

Straker went out. Freeman might not have existed any longer. He watched the Commander stop in the outer office and shake Peter Carlin's hand. The two of them strolled away.

Carlin said: 'I'm flying back tonight, sir. Back in Skydiver by morning.'

'Fine.'

They were heading for the car park. Straker walked with his head down, as though thinking of something too important to be interrupted.

Carlin ventured: 'I just thought, before I left, there might be something you could tell me. About how it worked out, I mean.'

The Commander could have slapped him down fast, told him to get on with the job and not ask questions. But somehow Carlin knew in his bones that this wasn't going to happen. Instead, Straker said: 'One thing I've got to tell you. Not something you'll enjoy. But you'd sooner hear it, I think, than go on year after year, not knowing.'

It was something else he had known, had sensed through every fibre of his being. 'It's my sister, isn't it? It's about Leila.'

'Yes.

'She's dead. Really dead.'

'I'm afraid so.'

'This is definite—confirmed?'

'Confirmed,' said Straker. At last he looked at Carlin. 'I think you know how sorry I am.'

'What happened?'

'Can't we leave it at that? You have my word—'

'Yes, sir,' said Carlin. 'I take your word. But I'd still like to know.'

They stopped near the first line of cars. Far above a jet plane moaned down the sky. With one part of his mind Peter Carlin was with it, ranging the heavens; the rest of him was here, earthbound, determined not to move until he had had an answer.

Straker said: 'Your sister was last seen in the vicinity of a UFO incident. We're now in a position to say what some, at any rate, of the intentions of these aliens are. The body you recovered from the sea was subjected to intense medical examination. The heart was a transplant. Tissue analysis was compared with National Medical Records. The donor was Leila Carlin.'

You could wait for the worst, wait for it for so long that you half expected it to be a relief; but when it came, it was still the worst. Carlin was stunned. He tried to visualize the whole process, the whole

appalling meaning of it; then tried not to visualize it.

‘What will you tell your parents?’ asked Straker.

‘I don’t know.’

‘You realize, they can never know the truth.’

‘I’ve never told them any of the truth so far,’ said Carlin with an effort. ‘I’m . . . not likely to start now.’

‘No. The comment was unnecessary. I withdraw it.’

That was it, then. The end of it. Only of course there could never truly be an end when there was still so much to do.

Skydiver was waiting for him below the waves. He wanted to be back, wanted to be sure of not missing anything. There was a long, tough struggle ahead. He wasn’t going to flinch. There was nothing, now, but this certainty.

9

THE PACE had been hot but now was cooling. Paul Foster ought to have been grateful for the let-up, but found it was a lot more like a let-down. He had slugged his way through the tough physical training and the tougher mental conflict, and it had been made clear to him that if there had been any formal examination at the end of the syllabus he'd have graduated *summa cum laude*. SHADO had fashioned themselves a high grade operative. He was not just ready for action: he was itching for it.

So it was discouraging to find himself filling in time as a film executive instead of being sent out immediately on some strenuous assignment. It was not that the work wasn't arduous enough—the hours were long, the problems often hair-raising, and you needed to be awake the whole time while dealing with stars and would-be stars, smart agents and glib producers with complex package deals,—but it wasn't the work he had signed on to do.

In any other situation he would have protested. It wouldn't have been the first time in his life that he had stormed into the boss's office, pounded the desk with his fist, and declared that either some changes were made or he wouldn't be around much longer. But after months of SHADO indoctrination there was one thing established above all others in his mind: you used your initiative, you must be prepared to cope with any emergency that arose and to cope alone if needs be . . . but you didn't argue points of policy.

On the face of it he had plenty of opportunities for enjoyment. There were always beautiful girls wanting to break into the film business, and equally beautiful girls wanting to stay in it. They were always willing to share their glamour with an influential studio executive. He need never lack feminine company. The trouble was, an unbroken succession of ravishing girls became eventually as dull as a repetitive floral pattern on a roll of wallpaper.

When a particularly untrustworthy agent brought a particularly decorative brunette to Paul's flat after a hectic working day, Paul engaged her not because she was gorgeous to look at and not because he was tired and wanted to get rid of the intruders, but because he had checked up on the girl's performance in a Three-D TV Theatre presentation and concluded that, once before a camera and away

from, her protective little parasite, she might well be able to act. He watched the smooth follow-through of her gestures, listened to the nuances of her voice, and calculated the potential. With those slightly slanting eyes, she would do for that new historical epic they were planning.

Historical epics, while history was being violently made all round them!

Paul forced himself to concentrate on his immediate chores, and agreed on terms for a contract. Jacyntha would go through the Harlington-Straker star making process. The first step would be to find her a name: he refused to believe that anybody could really be called Jacyntha. Maybe the truth would come out when they exchanged contracts.

'Well, Mr Foster, it's been nice dealing with you.' The agent pawed his hand, nodded, grinned, and was obviously working out dazzling percentages in his greasy head.

'Let's hope it works out,' said Paul.

'Don't worry, it will. I promise you, I wouldn't have let Jacyntha here consider a contract unless I had confidence in her future—a great future, I promise you, Mr Foster.'

The girl smiled a phoney, over-rehearsed smile. Another bad habit of which they'd have to break her.

'One day'—the agent had no idea when it was time to stop talking—'your studio will thank me. This is just the start of a long, wonderful relationship.'

Paul held the door open. Jacyntha swept through, flashing another of her smiles.

'Don't forget the contract is subject to the director's approval.'

'Oh, I'm sure you'll make him see things your way, Mr Foster.' The agent paused in the doorway. He lowered his voice. 'I'm sure we can come to some agreement. You and I, we can help each other, if you know what I mean.'

Paul said: 'Yes, well, I think that's about it.'

'Thanks once again. And don't forget—I really do mean it. A little bit of help—two-way traffic, right?'

Paul succeeded in steering him out and closing the door. He yawned. He was weary. When he got to bed he found that something in the agent's knowing wink and his intolerably over-emphatic voice was still bothering him. It was as though he had been given a message in simple code which his tired brain was for some reason unable to crack.

The message he got next morning wasn't in code. It was quite clear. Report to Mr Freeman below stairs—a euphemism for the express-lift descent to the SHADO labyrinth where the upper-world Mr Freeman automatically became the lower-world Colonel Freeman.

'Fit?' Freeman greeted him laconically.

'The perfect end product of your training schedule,' said Paul. 'At least, that's the way I feel.'

'Good. Then you'll be in good trim to go on a location recce.'

'Location?'

'For a new picture.'

'I didn't know we—'

'That, at any rate, will be the front office story if anyone asks for you. You're away on location. Right?'

'Right. And where will I really be?'

'Doing an intensive month of physical training.'

'But I've already done that. A whole lot more than a month.'

'This,' said Freeman, 'is special. Postgraduate stuff, you might say.'

Paul wondered just how intensive they could get. He restrained himself from asking which limbs they would try to tear off him this time, and what new tortures some sadist was so specially designing for him. He simply said:

'Bring it on.'

Freeman's attractive, bent grin surfaced for a moment. 'I'm not promising anything,' he said. 'We have to wait for . . . mm . . . certain big decisions. But with a bit of luck you might end up on an interesting assignment.'

'Bring that on, too.'

Paul took his time leaving the maze of corridors. The sheer pounding energy of it all gave an added pulse to his blood. He would sooner be down here than up there, making like the Alexander Korda of 1980.

The door of one of the laboratories was open. Two men were leaning over a huddle of equipment on a test bench. It might have added up to an electron microscope; or it might not. The familiar figure of Commander Straker stood to one side. He could stand like that for hours, not interfering with the work of his subordinates, not spying on them, but learning, adding more items to the storehouse of information inside his head.

At last one of the men looked up. Paul recognized the profile as that of Kelly, whose crash course on emergency repairs had been part of

his own training programme.

'Maybe two modifications,' he announced, 'and we're away.'

'Quite a set-up,' said Straker. 'When can I tell the Commission we'll be ready to go?'

'Three, four weeks,' said the other man. 'We have to check out the link systems.'

'That's what I wanted to hear.'

'Commander . . .' Kelly stopped Straker as he was about to turn away towards the door. 'Can I have a word with you?'

'What's on your mind?

'Tomorrow you're going to ask the Astro-Space Commission for a billion dollars.'

'For one of the most important projects we've ever undertaken.'

'Sure. Top item on the agenda. How many others are there—fifty-three, maybe?'

Straker was still attentive, but his voice hardened. 'As you were applying for an allocation, you were shown the requisition list. You know how many items, Kelly.' He was ready to go on listening but he was giving a warning against insubordination.

'Fifty-three,' Kelly repeated. 'Mine's number fifty-two, right? It comes right after "how much money do we spend on new coffee machines?" '

Straker was silent.

'Look,' said Kelly. 'All I'm asking for is fifty thousand dollars. And the chances are I won't get it.'

'I don't see how I can help.'

'I think my project's important, sir. You could speak up for me.'

'Now, wait a minute. You've done a great job on this device here, but your group—'

'Group?' said Kelly derisively. 'There's just the two of us, Commander. But with that fifty thousand dollars we could complete the development of the stereoscan.'

'I think you're on the wrong track. Looking the wrong way, Kelly. Instead of squinting into a microcosm, you ought to be turning your talents outwards. Space—that's where we've got to look.'

'Yessir,' said Kelly, resigned. 'Good luck. I hope you get your billion.'

'I've got to get it,' said Straker.

As he came out he saw Paul, and stopped.

‘Morning, sir.’

‘Morning, Foster. Seen Colonel Freeman?’

‘A few minutes ago.’

‘All set?’

‘All set.’

But set for what? Paul wished he knew.

The walls of the conference room were adorned with diagrams and photographic blow-ups. General Henderson was inspecting them when Straker arrived. He liked to spot possible objections and provide himself with ammunition for debate before they even started.

He turned as Straker came in, followed by the four other members of the Commission. Lieutenant Masters, Kelly’s assistant, deferentially brought up the rear and closed the door.

‘All very pretty,’ said Henderson. ‘But don’t try to bulldoze us into any of your pet schemes, Straker.’

‘I won’t have to.’

Henderson walked to the head of the table. There was still the faint, angry white line of an old scar under his left jaw and he still walked with an almost imperceptible limp, legacies of that UFO attack on the Rolls ten years ago.

He said: ‘The finance committee of the Astro-Space Commission is in session.’ They sat down. ‘We have two functions. The first is the formality of approving the appropriations for the corning year. The second’—he picked up a sheet packed with figures, and the other members obediently looked down at the copies in front of them—‘is to consider what I see as an increasingly long list of special projects. You all know Commander Straker . . . and by the billion dollars cost estimate beside it, you’ll have realized that the first project on the agenda is his.’

‘Thank you, General,’ said Straker. ‘I’m glad to see you can still count zeros.’

The man on Henderson’s right chewed on a smile and hurriedly swallowed it down. Henderson glared, then with venomous politeness said:

‘Commander Straker. The floor is yours.’

Straker stood up and went to the first diagram on the wall

‘This is a standard B142 space probe. Basic equipment similar to that used in our Space Intruder Detector. The new project will use a modified version of this craft.’

Henderson raised one brindled, bushy eyebrow at the commanding use of the word 'will'.

Straker moved on and pointed to the domed structure on the next diagram. 'From this cross-section you will see it incorporates a device that in layman's terms can be described as an electronic telescope. The principle is very simple. It's a telescope which, instead of using light, operates with a stream of electrons. It is capable of scanning with a magnification of up to times 2,500. Lieutenant . . .'

Masters was waiting with a sequence of photographs showing Earth taken from an orbit between 450 and 500 miles out. He passed them round. Straker waited for the impressive pictures to make their impact, then went on:

'The electron telescope scans an area, radios the information back to Earth, and the impulses are translated into these pictures. I think you will agree that the definition is as good as any ordinary photograph.'

Heads nodded in agreement, save Henderson's. He sat immobile and non-committal.

'My project,' said Straker, 'is to launch a modified B142 space probe and put it in a parking orbit around the Moon.'

'We already have a detector satellite,' said Henderson curtly.

'Not like this one. Once we've got it up there—'

'Straker,' said Henderson. 'SHADO doesn't have the facilities for a delivery of that magnitude.'

'No. We'd have to use NASA for the launch. The electro-telescope and the electronics are still on the secret list, so assembly would have to take place after the probe was in orbit. Moonbase astronauts and our own specialists would have to be out there on the job.'

'I'm beginning to see why the cost estimate is a billion dollars.'

'The tracking and homing mechanisms are also very elaborate,' Straker continued, 'but they've been fully tested. They will enable the probe to home in on the planet from two million miles out.'

Henderson at last allowed himself a triumphant, wintry grin. 'I'm sorry to disillusion you, Straker, but I can get you some great shots of Earth with a two-dollar camera from a balloon.'

Straker let Henderson enjoy himself for a few seconds, then said: 'I should have been more explicit. By the planet I didn't mean Earth. The purpose of this project is for the space probe to track and follow a UFO to its point of origin. To home in and get high definition, close-ups of the alien planet wherever it may be.'

'You're not seriously suggesting—'

‘Some of this chart,’ said Straker, moving to the largest of his exhibits, ‘is what you might call galactic guesswork. But a lot of it is based on records kept these last ten years, first on Earth and then coordinated with lunar observations. Look at this possible trajectory. If you’ll give me just ten minutes . . .’

Paul Foster was called away from his training schedule just at a time when he felt his lungs were going to give out on him. He had been in and out of decompression chambers, had carried out tricky repair jobs in a condition of weightlessness, and wanted to ask only one thing: did all this add up to what he hoped it added up to? But he didn’t dare to ask, in case it proved a wrong guess.

Straker and Freeman were together. As he entered the office, Straker was saying:

‘And we’ve even got a time slot from NASA, Launch seven-one-two, in four weeks.’

‘That’s great.’

Straker looked across his desk at Paul Foster.

‘Bearing up?’ he asked drily.

‘I’ll live.’

‘So I should hope. We’ve got a job for you.’ Paul held his breath. Straker said: ‘How would you like to go to the Moon?’

10

THE WILDERNESS of grey crags and dustbowls sharpened in detail as the small craft skimmed in along its descending loop. Then plain and mountains were gone again, as braking rockets shuddered and the vessel was turned for landing.

As they settled, the confused view through the observation port was obscured by a swirling cloud of dust. Paul Foster wanted to get out, to set foot on the Moon without further delay. But Straker was waiting, letting the dust clear, watching the pilot check through his control panel procedure. It seemed an age before the inner door slid back to let them into the airlock, and another age before the outer door opened to reveal the surface of the moon bathed in a haze of Earthlight.

The landing platform was close to a bulbous complex of buildings which seemed to spring like some colourful fungus from the harsh ground. Its curved outlines did not belong to this world of jagged rocks and raw, angular skyline. From a central block, connecting walkways led to a circle of five outer spheres, each enclosed in a protective skin of tough lightweight plastic panels, individually sprung to reduce the impact of meteorites. One passage, ending in an airlock, pointed directly at the landing platform.

Straker led the way. Paul found himself moving forward too quickly with springy steps. He had to force himself to slow down. Lunar gravity, only one-sixth that of Earth, offered too many temptations: he had been too rigorously trained to indulge in any light-headed skipping and leaping, but it was hard to resist the impulse to thrust away with one heel and see how far you could travel without touching the ground again.

The edges of the surrounding rocks were sobering in their sharpness. One savage tear through the spacesuit fabric, and death could be instantaneous.

They went into the airlock and on into a decontamination chamber where they stripped and were sprayed by a fine rain of what smelled like a tangy aftershave lotion. In the next constricted room were lightweight uniforms, as soft to the skin as fine-meshed silk. With gravity adjusted closer to Earth conditions, but still on the light side, and with balanced temperature, oxygenation, and humidity control,

there was no need for cumbersome garments in Moonbase.

As they proceeded down the main corridor, a girl came towards them. Paul repressed a gasp. He accepted the idea of lightness and brightness in clothing, all right; but it had not occurred to him that the female operatives would be quite so sleek and shapely, or that their work suits would hug them quite so closely. Nor had he expected to meet a girl with shimmering mauve hair.

'Welcome to Moonbase, Commander.'

'Thank you.'

'I'll show you to your quarters.'

'First I'd like to visit Control. I want to be quite sure in my mind about that space probe.'

They went on into the Control sphere.

It was more compact than the great spread of SHADO Control back on Earth, but its essentials were the same. The computer banks and control panels packed the walls with breaks only for a wide window showing the lunar surface and for a cavity holding a slowly revolving model of the Moon. The domed ceiling had eight ports. There were two clocks, one indicating Earth Elapse Time, the other shaded half light and half dark, showing the 28-Earthday cycle of lunar day and night. These were flanked by an illuminated, winking space chart, a smaller version of the one operating on Earth to plot movements of spacecraft and view different areas of the heavens.

Two space tracker consoles were positioned facing the entrance. In the centre of the sphere was a larger revolving console. A coloured girl with a rich, lazy mouth but glowingly alert eyes sat at one of the trackers. At the main console was a poised, green-eyed young woman who could only be the Gay Ellis of whom Paul had heard. With that complexion she looked as though she ought to be a brunette; but like the girl who had welcomed them, and like the other operatives in the Control sphere, she wore a uniform issue mauve anti-static wig. Funny, thought Paul appreciatively: you might have imagined that uniformity of this kind would detract from the girls individual charms . . . but it just wasn't so.

'Commander—good to see you again.'

'Hello, Gay.' Straker looked more relaxed than Paul had yet seen him, as though, incongruously, this remote outpost was more congenial than home. 'Nina . . . Joan. Oh, let me introduce Colonel Foster.'

Green eyes, deep brown eyes and blue-dusted eyes smiled an unforced welcome. Paul was struck by the contrast between their

spontaneity and the mannerisms of that would-be film star he had been so glad to leave behind in the Harlington-Straker studios. The tightly disciplined way of life they had to live up here didn't seem to have made them difficult or neurotic: not at first acquaintance, anyway.

'How's the food these days?' asked Straker.

The dark girl, Nina, chuckled throatily. 'Just about the same.'

'That's what I was afraid you'd say.' Straker walked round the main console. 'Do you have the report on the space probe, Gay?'

'I thought it wouldn't take you long to get around to that.'

'It's what we're here for. How does it look?'

'Apogee 0 decimal 124 below requirement. But we can easily correct that.'

'It's settled in nicely. Good. We can make corrections with a rocket blast when we send the astronauts out to install the final stages.'

'I've worked out a rough schedule for them.'

'Fine, fine. We'll have to go through it together, of course.'

'I did say it was a rough schedule.'

'I understand.'

Gay Ellis' lips twitched once, slightly. 'I hope you don't think—'

'Lieutenant,' Straker interrupted, 'I appreciate all the work you've done. Don't get me wrong. Really.'

'Thank you, sir.'

For an instant Paul had expected them to bristle at each other. There had been the suspicion of some tiny, meaningless resentment—a protest quickly stifled, a situation briskly put right. He wondered what there was between Straker and Gay Ellis, or what there might once have been. Then he dismissed the notion. Straker would never have allowed himself to get that close to becoming a human being.

'Joan.' Straker turned to the operative who was checking the television monitor circuits. 'Would you care to show Colonel Foster round? It's his first visit here.'

Joan nodded. 'A pleasure,' she said; and made it sound as though she meant it.

'We'll meet in Central Park in fifteen minutes,' said Straker. I want to put you all in the picture.'

Joan's arm brushed against Paul's as they left the Control sphere. Those glossy wigs might be anti-static, but there was nevertheless a tingle of electricity in the air. Paul glanced at the confidently tilted

chin and the leisurely swing of Joan's lithe body. She answered his glance with a self-possessed smile. They were sure of themselves, these Moonwomen, he thought ruefully.

They inspected the automatically-controlled kitchen and the functionally stark yet comfortably furnished dining room, lined with compact automats. He supposed the dispensers were all fed from synthetics, but when he stopped to try a fruit juice it came out like . . . well, just like fruit juice.

The sleeping cubicles were packed into one of the outer spheres, mostly as ascetic as a hermit's cell but lightened here and there by some distinctive personal touch.

'And Central Park?' he asked, puzzling over Straker's odd phrase.

'It's about time we reported there. Let's go.'

Central Park had started as a nickname, and now the recreation area was stuck with it. In the heart of the Moonbase complex, it boasted more comfortable chairs, softer colours, and a surprising variety of flowers and shrubs arranged with loving care—an oasis in the Moon's airless desert.

Paul had expected to find Straker himself there, but the Commander had not meant it that way. All off-duty personnel were assembled. Straker was in Control, ready to address all Moonbase operatives over the internal system.

His voice filtered through the leaves of Central Park, and resounded in the astronauts' chamber where interceptor crew waited on permanent alert, ready to dive into the chutes and blast off in their fighter craft if any UFO came spinning down from space.

'Because of a Security clampdown'—Straker wasted no time on a preamble—'no one on Moonbase yet knows the purpose of Project Discovery, as it has been codenamed. I do know how hard you've all been working, and, as we say in the movie business, now it can be told. As you know, a modified B142 probe is now in parking orbit around the Moon. First phase accomplished successfully, thanks to NASA—and to you. Next we have to fit specialized equipment into that probe. Some of it has already been shipped you here. The top secret stuff travelled with Dr Masters, Colonel Foster, and myself. When it's installed, we have a tricky job ahead. We have got to manoeuvre a UFO into a position where the probe can be activated into a new flight pattern which will enable it to follow the alien back to its place of origin.'

There was a silence. Incredulous faces turned towards Paul. Nina and Joan raised questioning eyebrows. He nodded to confirm what

they had just heard.

'Maybe the UFO won't play,' Straker continued dourly. 'We don't want to destroy it, but we daren't let it have its own way down on Earth. Somehow it has to be coaxed close enough, then frightened off. And the probe goes after it. When the probe is within two million miles of its target, it will start to transmit. With luck we should get the first close shots of another world. It will be our first step towards taking the fight back to the alien planet.'

The silent throb of speculation became a noisy outburst when Straker had finished. Paul found himself being badgered by questions. Off-duty personnel wanted to get back on duty right away, as though by slaving away nonstop for days on end they could somehow coax a UFO towards them and hasten the day when the tide of fortune could be turned. Paul sensed the eagerness throughout the whole of Moonbase—an eagerness that lasted after the first babble of excitement died down. He began to understand the mystique of the place. When personnel were selected for Moonbase they had to show themselves capable of something more than ordinary teamwork: there had to be mutual trust and mutual enthusiasm as deep and loyal as the precepts of a religious sect. However casual they might be, however relaxed in Central Park and however matter-of-fact on duty spells, they were all fired with a fire that didn't ever get damped down.

'Who goes out to the probe?' asked Nina.

'Who do you think?' Paul, infected by them, was impatient to be at work. 'I didn't come up here just for the ride, you know.'

He and Masters went out in the lunar module the morning after their arrival. Morning in terrestrial reckoning, that was: Moonbase had another week to go before it emerged from night into scorching sunlight.

Now the gruelling training showed its worth. Paul Foster had thought pretty well of himself—perhaps too highly, he sheepishly confessed—when he had been a test pilot; but without SHADO's intensive programme he would have been as scared and helpless as a child out here . . . out here, swinging gently on the end of a cable which trailed from the lunar module across a bottomless chasm, a dizzying infinity too vast for man to comprehend. If you thought about it, you would go mad. But you didn't think about it: you walked out into space, swam on the end of a lifeline towards the hovering spikiness of the space probe, and clamped yourself to it as though working unconcernedly at some minor repairs to a garden shed.

Masters floated the electron telescope out to him. Paul made no

clumsy grabs for it. They did everything in calculated, practised slow motion. He hauled the telescope in, turned it gently, and steered it into the waiting slot.

Absorbed in the task of securing, checking, and re-checking the connections, reading back each sequence to Masters and waiting for his confirmation, he was not aware of time passing. The sun was a seething blaze beyond the rim of Earth. The Moon was a dark disc tipped with gold. Flecks of light glinted within the metal complexities of the space probe. Paul was surprised when Masters' voice crackled in his ear: 'Signal verified. All functions go.' He went hand over hand down the line, back into the module, and it was only then that his hands began to tremble and he comprehended just how intensively, unsparingly he had been concentrating on the task.

His tone was quite steady when he transmitted: 'Space probe detail to Control. Mission wrapped up. Equipment installed. Functioning. Please test identification signal.'

There was the briefest pause, then Straker said: 'Signal spot on. Congratulations.'

The Commander was indeed in a mellow mood, thought Paul.

They returned to Moonbase just as duty shifts were changing. A buxom girl in blue mesh who could have been simply a duplicate of the others but was in fact her own gorgeous self took over at one of the tracker consoles. Paul and Masters crossed Control in the middle of a flurry of flippant greetings and farewells.

'See you in six hours . . .'

'Don't wake us, we'll wake you . . .'

Straker was waiting. Didn't he ever sleep or ever creep off into a corner for a bit of solitary contemplation?

He said: 'Before you all disperse, let's sum up. Right?'

The buzz of facetious interchanges died away. Paul Foster, aching for the comfort of one of those neat little sleep cubicles, kept himself upright by an effort. He caught an approving glimmer from a pair of blue eyes, and thought that the brown ones could be coaxed into cooperating, given a little time.

SHADO HQ was more real than the camouflage studios. And Moonbase was somehow one step on from HQ itself. Here you were right in the front line. It would suit him to be right here, all the time.

'The probe's in orbit,' said Straker. 'Great. Equipment installed, tested, lined up. Lieutenant Ellis . . .?'

Gay Ellis said: 'The problem is to force a UFO into an orbit complementary to the space probe's. Then we can activate the probe

tracking systems and latch it on to the UFO. That involves scheduling the interceptors very precisely. When we launch our boys, they have to be able to nudge that . . . that *thing* just where we want it nudged.'

'But we never know which way the aliens come in,' protested Nina.

'We have made a computer study of UFO approaches and flight paths, and the general sector patterns are not too diverse.'

'Even so—'

'Even so,' Straker took her up grimly, 'a lot of on-the spot decisions will have to be taken.'

Paul thought of those whirling dervishes thrashing unpredictably in, singeing their way through the stratosphere and atmosphere. Play it by ear? They weren't going to have much time. Once past the Moon, maybe coming in from the far side, a UFO could wreak havoc on Earth before it went home and they could follow it.

'Dangerous,' he said aloud.

Gay Ellis quirked her mouth at him. 'It involves a risk, yes, Colonel.'

'A calculated risk,' said Straker. 'Based on a careful weighing of human factors as much as logic. Based, if you like, on my confidence in what the Moonbase team will do when the whistle goes.'

There was a silence. Silence, because there was nothing to say and nothing to do. Not yet.

'All we can do now,' said Straker, 'is wait for a UFO.'

11

IT CAME ten hours before Straker had decreed that he and the rest of his team should return to Earth. It was no good waiting here indefinitely for a UFO that would choose its own time to arrive. Obligingly it anticipated their departure. It came in bright and purposeful, at first the pinpoint of a remote star and then the shimmering teetotum they had learned to identify, hunt down, and destroy.

Only this time it must not, at any cost, be destroyed.

SID uttered the warning in its inhuman vocables, quiet but incisive. 'Red alert. Red alert.'

Nina picked up the message instantaneously. 'This is Control. I have a red alert.'

The scanners rotated. Gay Ellis dropped the plastic correspondence chit on which she had been stippling a brief message to Earth. Straker allowed himself the nearest thing to a trot he was willing to display. Paul Foster reached Control as Nina centred two signal traces on the tracker screen.

'Have UFO on positive track area 142 blue.'

Joan, now no longer feminine—or no more feminine than Diana the huntress—said crisply: 'Speed SOL 8.35. Tracking positive.'

'141 blue . . . 140 . . . 139 . . .'

The eerie, impersonal resonance of SID added its quota. 'Flight path Moon tangential. Parabola for Pacific splashdown or altitude 20 circumference. Course steady.'

'135 . . . 134 . . . 133 . . .'

'Course correction one degree,' intoned SID.

Straker stood a few feet away from the Control console as Gay Ellis hurried in and settled herself at it. Her gaze raked the dials. She glanced once over her shoulder at Joan and Nina, then nodded. She was quite calm; quite unshakable.

Straker said: 'All yours, Lieutenant.'

'Control to interceptors. Immediate launch. Repeat—immediate launch.'

The three duty astronauts swung themselves into the action chutes

and slid down into the cockpits of the interceptors. Clamps snapped back, doors swung into position, the engines flamed into a dragon roar of fury, and the three fighters were away, hill-hopping above the savage fangs of the lunar ranges. Men and machines became one: the trio of fighters an entity.

Seek . . . find . . . destroy.

Only not this time. The insistent message had been dinned into them, and now was sent out again. Seek, find . . . but don't destroy. For once, let it go. Frighten it, make it run for home.

The belch of rockets flared briefly and died above the mountains of the Moon, staining the dark vacuum and then snuffing out.

'Range 75 million,' SID was declaring. SID was the only one not keyed-up, the only one steady and dispassionate. 'Speed one and a half million miles a second. Range 70 million . . . 65 . . . 60 . . .'

'Maintaining SOL 8. Red 129-046.'

'Deflection?'

'Negative.'

'Entering area red 081.'

'Range 18 million . . . 17 million . . .'

Paul Foster said: 'There! There it is!'

It was showing now as a tiny white marker moving with inconceivable slowness across the illuminated wall chart. The trace edged on, steady and remorseless.

Then it veered off in a shallow arc.

'Changing course,' breathed Nina.

Confirmation from SID sparked a welter of lights along the tracker panels.

'We'll have to readjust the schedule,' said Paul.

Straker was already on his way towards the Control console. Gay Ellis looked up, stopped him in his tracks. His right hand was up and out as though reaching for the main input knob. It stayed in mid-air, frozen. Grittily he said: 'Carry on, Lieutenant. Compute new flight path.'

'Control to interceptors. Stand by for new attack plan. 042 . . . 00102 . . . Increase speed to SOL 1127.'

'Roger Control.'

Data fed like mincemeat into the computer came out in a new, solid pattern—a mincer working back to front. Voices rasped in from the interceptors; instructions went out, revisions were added, operatives

talked urgently without ever taking their eyes off the splaying tracks on the screen.

Joan said: ‘Interceptors losing contact, sir. Any second now, they’ll be out of range.’

Any other man would have cursed aloud. Straker said icily: ‘We’ve got to turn it.’

Paul positioned himself at one side of the chart, where he could watch every manoeuvre without obstructing anybody else’s view. ‘A detonation about here’—his little finger sketched a wobbly circle about the thrusting speck of light—‘and we might swing it.’

Straker said: ‘I want no “might” and no “maybe”. When we kick, he’s got to feel the boot.’ He stood beside Paul. ‘Tell the interceptors to explode a missile in area blue 128.’

Gay Ellis’ voice sang out through space. ‘Control to interceptors. Break formation. Missile firing sequence for leader—input 101002, time 15 decimal 18 seconds.’

‘Roger. Firing sequence set.’

‘Run in leader, third and second, in that order. One missile and one only. To start with. Await further order. Firing 5 decimal 2 seconds.’

They tensed. Nina bent over her console as though to wrest a decision from it. In the Control sphere there was no sound; but far out in space there must have been flame and a great surge of shock waves. On the wall chart the elusive blob of light wavered a fraction. Paul Foster watched. No change, he thought. No change. He found that the end of his tongue was raw where he had bitten it or perhaps driven it hard against the back of his teeth.

The light was falling towards the lower rim of the chart.

‘It’s altered course,’ said Joan.

The marker trailed towards another speck of brightness. The UFO was approaching the space probe.

‘It’s coming round’—Paul hardly recognized the hoarse whisper as his own—‘just right.’

A frenzied new countdown began. Intersection course, velocity, pick-up point . . .

‘We’ll have to use a second missile,’ said Gay.

‘Get it right.’ Straker was stony, implacable. ‘We can’t lose it now. One nudge—that’s all.’

Gay bowed her head over the console. When at last her finger stabbed down it was an inconsequential gesture, as if she could no longer be bothered.

‘Launch,’ she said.

Confirmation flashed back from the interceptor.

Joan cleared her throat, waited, and then said: ‘Detonation positive.’

SID added an authoritative crackle. ‘UFO veered to course 301. Estimate B142 will link up in 43 seconds.’

Paul watched the slow convergence. ‘We’ve done it,’ he muttered. Then, louder: ‘We’ve done it!’

The UFO was turning and heading back the way it had come. The space probe rockets fired, and the probe settled into a path behind the UFO. Speeds increased; the traces on the chart blended, separated slightly, then came together again; the probe held its distance.

‘Done it,’ Paul repeated. He needed reassurance. If he said it aloud, often enough, it simply had to come true.

The path was firm and unwavering now. Quarry and pursuer were set for home—wherever that alien home might be.

Straker broke the tension. ‘Coffee ?’

There was a spurt of laughter, a sigh, a slackening of eyes and muscles. Gay Ellis moved away from the Control console, and Joan slipped into her place. Straker put out one hand as Gay stumbled.

Paul followed them towards the dining room in the adjoining sphere. A few snatches of conversation drifted back to him. He slowed his pace, but both Straker and Gay Ellis had voices which, though quiet, were clear and penetrating.

‘. . . drive yourself too hard,’ Straker was saying.

‘I never realized you wanted us to take it easy.’

‘All I’m saying . . .’

They went into the dining area and crossed to the automats. Paul hesitated, then went in.

‘It’s just that I’d never want anyone to think . . .’ Gay broke off.

‘To think,’ said Straker, ‘that they have to make allowances because Gay Ellis is a woman. Look, you don’t have to prove anything. The record speaks for itself. And don’t ever forget . . .’

They both became aware of Paul’s presence. Neither looked perturbed. Nobody, he thought, had the right to be as beautiful as Gay Ellis and to be as cool as that, as untouchable as that. What a pair, she and Straker: the Snow Queen and the Human Icicle!

‘I was thinking, Paul,’ said Straker, collecting a plastic cupful of coffee and politely, indifferently handing it over, ‘we can leave the girls to it now. Departure 1800 hours tomorrow, right?’

‘Right, sir.’

Gay sipped her coffee and suppressed a yawn. She rubbed her knuckles across her eyes. ‘When do you expect the first pictures through?’

‘Four months,’ said Straker.

‘It seems an awfully long time.’

‘It’s going to seem a lot longer when we have to live through it. But that’s our experts’ assessment. Four months. Let’s hope they’re worth waiting for.’

Let’s do just that, Paul mutely concurred.

Four infuriating, interminable months! . . .

He was in SHADO Control with Straker and Freeman when at last the prints began to come through.

At first sight they were a disappointment. He didn’t know what he had expected, but they ought surely, somehow, to have been more dramatic than this. There were smudges which might have been cloud layers or vegetation, a wavery line which could have been a canal, and dark patches reminiscent of mountain ranges on a terrestrial relief map. Nothing spectacular, nothing immediately compelling.

Straker took each print as it arrived and stooped over it, utterly absorbed.

Freeman said: ‘D’you suppose that’s an estuary; and these markings here a city?’

Paul moved away and held the most detailed of the prints under a strong light. Here it was at last, the surface of that alien world which kept launching destruction at our own world—but what secrets could be wrested from it?

Straker said: ‘Alec, tell the laboratory I want a preliminary report in by tomorrow morning. And I’ll be down to see Kelly just twenty-four hours from now. We’ve got what we went after. All we need now is interpretation, and they’d better get busy.’

Paul made a mental note of the time. This was something he wasn’t going to miss. He arrived at the laboratory just before Straker’s appointed hour, and was startled to find Gay Ellis already there.

‘Lieutenant!’

‘Colonel Foster,’ she acknowledged coolly.

‘Couldn’t sleep?’ he said. ‘Had to get up and come on a morning stroll to Earth?’

‘I’m on furlough.’

‘And this is how you spend your vacation?’

‘There’s a chance of some unexpected entertainment.’ Gay shot an oddly reproachful glance at Kelly, who busied himself with the spread of prints he had been arranging along the bench. ‘I wouldn’t want to miss one minute of it—whatever the consequences.’

Kelly said: ‘The Commander’s due right now. Lieutenant, if you wouldn’t mind . . .’

Gay shrugged and made her way towards a door leading into the adjoining darkroom. Mystified, Paul watched her go. Shorn of her Moonbase uniform and the incandescent wig, she ought to have been reduced to the stature of any reasonably attractive Earthwoman. In fact she was just as dominating, in a quite different way: in her boldly cut grey suit, with a flash of turquoise silk at the throat, she could have been a superbly confident, highly paid casting director for Harlington-Straker Studios. Gay Ellis, he conceded, could be absolutely anything she chose to be.

Straker came in.

‘I thought,’ he began bluntly, ‘your report might have been on my desk by now.’

‘We haven’t had time to get it all down on paper, sir,’ said Kelly.

‘Then let me have it verbally. Now.’

Kelly’s index finger and thumb clicked nervously together. He said:

‘There was a fault in the device.’

‘A fault?’

‘The range and magnification on each shot weren’t transmitted.’

‘Just what does this mean?’

‘It means,’ said Kelly, ‘that except for superfluous detail, these shots tell us very little.’

Straker glared at the array of prints and snatched up the nearest. ‘Look at this! Look at the detail. It must tell us *something*. What have we got experts for? Anyone used to interpreting an aerial photo—’

‘Anyone used to interpreting an aerial photo,’ said Kelly, ‘will want to know whether it was taken from a hundred feet, a hundred miles, or a thousand miles. And with a magnification of what—one or a thousand?’

‘Oh, come on.’ Straker tossed the print down again. ‘If I take a picture of a girl, from three feet or a hundred yards you can still see it’s a girl.’

Kelly did not reply, but went along the bench to where a projector was set up, aimed at the white wall near the darkroom. He flicked a

control.

'A close shot of the alien planet,' he said.

Paul was inclined to ally himself with Straker's protests. The definition was good enough to offer something, maybe a lot, to the trained eye. There appeared to be a lava formation, with what might have been adjoining vegetation. The picture changed, and Kelly said: 'That structure in the centre could be some sort of building.' He changed again, projecting what looked like an agricultural area, followed by another rock formation.

'And you're trying to tell me these shots tell us nothing?' said Straker.

'Commander, you said earlier that if you took a picture of a girl from three feet or a hundred yards you could still recognize it as a girl.'

'That's right,' said Straker irritably. 'I did.'

'Take a look at this, sir.' The wall area was covered by a shot which might have been taken from a plane racing above the surface of the Earth. 'Whatever the range,' said Kelly, 'there's not much doubt about this being the planet's surface, eh? Just about as close in as the probe got.'

'That's got to be some kind of vegetation.'

'Now let's pull back. You will note the curvature of the horizon . . . and pull back a little more now . . .'

Paul sensed before the Commander did that they were being taken for a ride. Kelly had a point to prove, and he was certainly going to prove it. That projector was no longer casting captured shadows on the wall: it was linked with something alive and not so far away.

Straker watched the picture blur and come back into focus. At last it began to dawn on him.

The magnification lessened. What had been a rough, pitted landscape smoothed out. A ragged edge of something synthetic cut across a corner of the picture.

They were looking at a human leg and the edge of a pair of briefs.

Kelly switched off the projector and went to the darkroom door. Straker was close behind him as he opened it.

In a flat monotone he said: 'Hello, Gay.'

'Hello, Commander.'

'Thanks. Lieutenant,' said Kelly.

Gay stood in the doorway, trailing a wire from an electrode taped to her leg. Kelly stooped and freed her.

‘Very dramatic,’ said Straker. ‘Very graphic.’

‘I thought, sir, that a practical demonstration—’

‘All right, Kelly. All right. You’ve made your point. Quite a problem, isn’t it? As a matter of academic interest, were *any* of those shots the original pictures from the probe?’

Kelly coughed apologetically. ‘Without knowing details of range and magnification,’ he said, ‘a lava flow becomes a piece of shattered polystyrene. Magnification X 2155. An agricultural area, the eye of a wasp. The surface of a planet, a piece of puffed wheat. And . . .’ He glanced down at Gay’s leg as she adjusted her skirt. It was a lot more attractive at this range, thought Paul, than magnified into a lumpy jungle.

‘How did you produce your fakes?’ demanded Straker. ‘They’re pretty good—in themselves.’

‘The secret is the three-dimensional effect. Depth of focus. It’s been known for twenty-five years, but it needs development.’

‘And that’s what you’d like to develop? While we’ve all been busy looking into outer space, you’ve been, delving into inner space. Your pet project.’

‘It’s a vast area, almost completely unexplored. I believe it could give us some of the answers to the basic questions about the universe; about life itself.’

Straker began to stride slowly, rhythmically about the laboratory. He stared accusingly at the walls and benches as though prepared for them to reach out and hit him.

Paul Foster wondered if Straker, too, was struck dumb by the concept of worlds within worlds, and yet more worlds within worlds, like a Russian doll whose tiniest replica could never be reached. Everything in this room, every object, even a speck of dust, contained billions of particles, each particle made up of millions of atoms. A whole universe within these four walls, and within that universe a myriad of universes. Walking across a field, along a beach, standing with a million grains of sand between your toes—how far down, how deeply in, to get down to the ultimate? Space was infinite both ways, inward and outward.

Straker said: ‘I shall put the whole matter to the Commission. You’ll get your appropriation, I promise.’

‘I thought you’d get the picture,’ said Gay.

He gave her a long, scathing look. ‘A greatly magnified picture!’

12

ALEC FREEMAN had been dreaming about a statuesque blonde who had a nasty habit of turning into a green-skinned alien every time he approached her. Just as he was making a desperate attempt to put his arms round her before the wicked spell took effect yet again, the alarm signal shrilled through the SHADO corridors. He groped wildly, felt himself falling, and rolled over along the ground—then found himself threshing about in bed, with the telephone clamouring by his ear.

Sourly he clawed the receiver into bed with him.

'Alec?' It was Straker's voice.

'Don't you ever sleep?' said Freeman muzzily.

'Hope I didn't wake you up.'

'Think nothing of it.'

'I'm in the car, on my way home. Haven't got the notes from our conference yesterday, but I've just thought of something. A couple of things I'd like to check with you. First, there's that business of . . .'

Straker's voice was cut off by a sharp, repeated bleep. Freeman, suddenly wide awake, sat up in bed. He knew the sound of an E alarm even when distorted through a telephone receiver.

'What is it? What's wrong?'

'Something in the car. Must be.'

'It could be a trigger mechanism. Get out of there—out of that car!'

He swung his legs off the bed, raging at his inability to do anything. Straker was too far away. Their only contact was this phone link. How long before the other end went dead?

'Can't locate it. No directional signal.' Straker sounded calm, but the insistent bleeping was nerve-racking.

Abruptly the Commander swore. Freeman heard a squeal of brakes and a succession of thuds in the earpiece. A horn blared and there seemed to be a rush of wind.

Then nothing.

'Are you all right?' he said urgently. 'Ed, are you all right?' He waited, then: 'Can you hear me? Can you . . .'

‘Yes,’ came the reply at last. ‘I’m fine. And I’ve found it.’

‘Be careful how you handle it.’

‘It won’t do me any harm.’ There was a brief pause. ‘Not now,’ concluded Straker.

‘What is it?’

‘A bugging device. Nice and inconspicuous under the dashboard. Someone’s out to get us, Alec. And,’ said Straker, ‘I’ve got a pretty good idea who it could be.’

They went together to Henderson’s office in a vast concrete block overshadowing what was left of Victorian London. There was an imposing list of names on the outer door: American directors, English directors, German associates. The reception office was imposing, too, and Henderson’s secretary was an armour-plated version of Straker’s own, irreplaceable Miss Ealand.

‘Good morning.’ Straker was halfway across the deep-piled carpet before she could extricate herself from behind a half-open drawer. ‘We’ll go straight in.’

‘I’m afraid there’s—’

‘It’s all right,’ said Freeman, fending her off as she made a dash to intercept the Commander. ‘Just show us where to sharpen our knives.’

Straker opened the inner door. Over his shoulder Freeman could see Henderson’s lifted head, and the back of another man’s head.

‘I’m sorry, sir,’ the secretary was bleating.

Henderson stood up. ‘Don’t worry, Miss Scott. Stopping runaway trains isn’t part of your job.’

Freeman went in behind Straker. Miss Scott closed the door, managing to make it clear that she would have liked to trap all their fingers in it.

‘This is an unpleasant surprise,’ said Henderson. He turned to his companion. ‘You know Jackson, of course.’

The eyes and ears of the world, thought Freeman with distaste. As Security Liaison Jackson had done good work for SHADO and they often called him in for advice on personnel selection and posting; but it had been growing more and more obvious in recent times that Jackson’s first loyalty was to the military rather than to SHADO. Freeman privately considered it was time they substituted some more appropriate description for ‘liaison’.

Jackson held out his hand.

Straker ignored it. Freeman said: ‘I can’t bear to touch anything

slippery.'

'Now that we've dispensed with the pleasantries,' said Henderson, 'may we discuss what has brought you here? I presume it isn't just a social call.'

Straker threw the minute little bugging device on to the wide desk.

'Yours, I believe.'

Henderson picked it up and weighed it in his palm as though assessing its worth. Then he passed it to Jackson, who endeavoured to maintain an air of innocence. It didn't fit his features.

'Standard Mark 4 bugging device,' he said. 'Range about three miles.'

'Planted in my car,' said Straker. 'Why?'

Jackson, silently consulted Henderson, who shrugged and gave in. 'Two reasons. One to test your security.'

'My security? Now look, General—'

'I meant to imply SHADO security, not yours personally.'

'Without consulting me, without—'

'Two days ago,' growled Henderson, 'we had to squash a press report. It concerned a Skydiver rendezvous with a supply ship.'

Freeman's stomach turned over. It had always been their great dread. Muzzling the press wasn't easy and wasn't pleasant, but they had disciplined themselves, learned how to cover up, not to gossip, never to allow the faintest possibility of an information leak; and now there had been an incident.

'It names the exact position and time,' said Henderson. 'We had to go right to the top to get a suppression notice.'

'It would have been unfortunate for Skydiver to have surfaced,' Jackson added, 'and been greeted by a boatload of reporters and photographers.'

Straker shook his head like a man dazed by a foul blow. 'If this is some kind of sick joke—'

'You've got yourself a major security breach. You'd better believe it.'

'You seem pretty positive it came from us.'

'Where else? As far as we can check—and you know how far we're prepared to go—it's specific to SHADO HQ under the studio.' Jackson looked pleased with himself. His professional pride welcomed disasters so long as they were disasters for whose discovery and punishment he was responsible.

‘To put it bluntly,’ Henderson summed up, ‘someone you work with every day is a security hazard.’

‘Just give us the details as far as they go,’ said Straker. ‘We’ll find him.’

‘If you don’t, we will. And soon.’

The two SHADO men were silent on the return journey to the studios. Each was trying to reject the idea of a traitor in their midst; and at the same time each was working but priorities for starting the investigation.

Straker spoke only as they drove in between the florid Harlington-Straker entrance gates.

‘I want you to concentrate on a mechanical check. Right through the entire system. I want computer time for a full-scale dossier check, and I want the summary on my desk by the end of the day. And I want copies of all outgoing and incoming signals.’

‘And who shall we trust to collect them and bring them to you?’ asked Freeman quietly.

Straker’s mouth tugged down in disgust. ‘It’s a swift-acting poison, isn’t it—suspicion?’

‘I’ll fix it, anyway. I’ll handle that part of it.’

‘No. I’ll be personally responsible.’

They stared at each other. Freeman knew that Straker’s trust in him wasn’t wavering: it was just that at a time like this every civilized instinct, every personal conviction had to be set aside. From now on every move Straker made would be cold, impersonal, implacable.

Freeman went through the studio complex with an electronic toothcomb. When he finally went to report to Straker he was able to say:

‘We’re clean.’

‘Hm. I didn’t really expect to find a hidden microphone in a wall.’

There were worse things than hidden microphones, though. It was a disturbing sensation, walking around and knowing that men you had relied on for years had sunk just about as low as it was possible to get. Collaborating with the aliens—for what reason, and on what terms? Freeman had even allowed himself to wonder about the trustworthiness of the two men who had accompanied him on his tour of the studios, offices and subterranean battle centre.

He saw that Straker was holding out a sheet of paper.

‘The coded message to Skydiver. The one that’s leaked.’

Freeman was paralysed, incapable of reaching for it.

‘Authorized and sent,’ said Straker, ‘by Foster.’

‘Paul Foster? I don’t believe it.’

‘Maybe we made a mistake. Maybe our judgement was wrong. Maybe,’ said Straker, ‘it would have been simpler to eliminate him at the start.’

‘I’ll go and see him.’

‘No. I’m the one who’s going to see him.’

Straker headed for the door.

‘Wouldn’t it be better to send for him? Have him in here. Security . . .’

‘I’m not sure I won’t feel more secure right in the middle of the floor, on Number 3.’

‘I’ll follow you down.’

Freeman waited for the Commander to agree to this or to reject it. But Straker’s mind was already on the tough task ahead. He went out without another word.

Freeman looked at the small pile of message sheets on the desk. That was a sign that Straker was distraught: safe as the electronic locks on that door were, proof against all save the chosen few with an automatic right of entry, it wasn’t like him to leave material in a classified category lying around.

The phone went.

‘General Henderson wants to come on the red line,’ said Miss Ealand, ‘with scrambler.’

‘Put him through.’

‘Oh, it’s Colonel Freeman. I’m not sure—’

‘Put him through,’ rasped Freeman. ‘I know what it’s all about.’

It was an unwarranted boast. He was taken aback when Henderson announced: ‘We’ve got another one. A leak, and an even bigger one. This time concerning a routine flight from Moonbase.’

Freeman controlled the shiver of his breathing. ‘Give me the details,’ he said.

When he had jotted down the notes and stalled on Henderson’s aggressive questions, he looked again at the sheaf of message duplicates. It took only a few minutes to leaf through them. The message Henderson had reported was easy enough to identify.

It was quite clear. The operation had been planned and authorized by Foster.

‘I don’t understand,’ said Paul Foster. ‘I just don’t get it.’

‘Did you transmit that message?’ said Straker.

‘Well, yes.’

‘I believe I outrank you, Foster.’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t happen to be wearing uniform right at this moment, but I’m not talking to you as a movie man. This is the real business. Right?’

‘Yes . . . sir.’

‘Who else knew about the Skydiver transmission?’

‘I mentioned it to Alec Freeman. Just a routine observation.’

‘You gave him details—position, time?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Did you talk about it to anyone else?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Then I’d like to know how this information got into the hands of a newspaper. I’d like you to explain that.’

‘A newspaper?’

‘Yes. The exact time and position of Skydiver’s rendezvous with the supply ship.’

Foster shook his head. ‘I don’t get it,’ he said again.

‘Neither do I.’ The bleeper in Straker’s wrist radio sounded gently. Straker lifted his wrist and listened. Then he said: ‘Right. Thank you, Alec.’ His eyes were merciless as he looked at Foster. ‘That makes a second item for the indictment. Who did you tell about Flight B-87 from Moonbase, the day before yesterday?’

‘I . . . this whole thing is ridiculous.’

‘Ridiculous? Maybe you’ll think a military court is ridiculous.’

‘A military court?’

‘When I report the position to Henderson, that’ll be the obvious outcome.’

‘It makes no sense.’

‘You’d better consider this: SHADO is run as a military organization. We’re at war, and you’ve known it from the start. And you know the penalty for espionage.’

‘You mean—’

‘I mean,’ said Straker, ‘you don’t get found guilty twice.’

13

THE COURT-MARTIAL took place in the barest of all the SHADO rooms, a conference room kept deliberately bleak and featureless so that there should be no distractions when important matters were under discussion.

It couldn't get much more important than this.

'What are his chances?' muttered Freeman as he and Straker slid on to chairs at the side of the room.

'I'll have a better idea when I see who's prosecuting.'

Henderson and two other officers walked towards the improvised judicial bench at one end of the room. There was a shuffle of feet as the small group of witnesses and military counsel stood.

'Gentlemen.' Was Henderson enjoying the whole act, or did his pontifical manner spring from subconscious yearnings he would never have admitted to himself? 'I convene this court-martial by the authority invested in me under Article 183 of our charter.' Fine, resounding, noble-like every inquisition, every persecution ever mounted by man against man. Alec Freeman had worked underground for SHADO for more years than he cared to think; and for the first time he knew what it was to suffer from claustrophobia. 'I must remind you,' said Henderson with unimpeachable gravity, 'that as of now everyone in this room is under oath to speak the truth.' He moved his aquiline nose a fraction of an inch to 'the left. 'Close the doors.' When the doors had been secured, there was no further delay, no gentle preliminary skirmish. 'The prosecuting officer may proceed.'

The prosecuting officer stood up. It was Jackson.

Close to Freeman's ear, Straker said: 'Whatever Foster's chances were, I'd say they've just been halved.'

Jackson looked round the court. He was a quiet fanatic. When he did a job, it had to be done just right: the mere fact that he of all people was doing it made it almost, by definition, right.

'The accused, Colonel Paul Foster, is indicted under Section 8 of SHADO Security regulations. I intend to show that he and he alone is responsible for, and therefore guilty of, the worst crime that can be perpetrated against his own kind and against our organization: espionage.'

It was drab in its simplicity. You felt that some middle-grade executive behind a middle-grade desk might, without a second glance, scribble a signature and write the whole thing off. It was so dull it must be true.

Jackson was good at the game. He made a deferential bow towards defence counsel.

The counsel was Webb, a serving officer who had been called to the Bar and then taken a post as legal adviser to the Ministry of Defence, from where he had been cajoled into liaison work with the CIA—whatever that might have involved—and more recently had been seconded to SHADO. He was a bit of a pedant, a scrupulously fair man . . . and utterly without Jackson's flair.

He stood up and said: 'The defence forgoes its right to speak at this time.'

Henderson nodded approvingly. He liked people to toe the line. 'Very well. The prosecuting officer will proceed.'

Having gone through the formal gestures and been given the go-ahead, Jackson squared his shoulders and announced: 'My first witness is Lieutenant Ford'.

Freeman folded his arms and crossed his legs. He wondered if he looked as glum as he felt; or, for that matter, as glum as Straker looked.

Young Ford sat in the witness chair. Beside his right elbow was a table with an electronic coding mixer on it. Ford glanced at it, and glanced away.

Jackson said: 'You are Lieutenant Keith Ford, and you are a technological operative in SHADO Control?'

'I am.'

'You recognize the apparatus on the table beside you?'

'Yes, sir. It's a standard code and transmit device.'

'Like the one used in SHADO Control?'

'Yes.'

'Will you tell us how it works, please?'

Ford relaxed. He was on familiar territory. 'The primary circuits are a series of electro-scanners positioned—'

'Lieutenant,' Henderson interrupted. 'We'd be grateful if you would keep the explanation as simple as possible.'

'Oh. Oh, yes, sir. Urn. Well, the input is inserted here'—he indicated a slit—'handwritten on a standard input docket.'

'You say the message is handwritten,' said Jackson. 'It seems an

antiquated method in this electronic age.'

'It's one of the best security checks we have. The device is programmed to scan and compare the card with standard samples. It will accept only authorized input.'

'So that if I, for example, wrote a message for transmission . . .?'

'It would be scanned and rejected.'

'Whose handwriting is the coder adjusted to accept?'

'Different executives have been empowered to transmit over different periods. At present, the clearance is for Commander Straker, Colonel Freeman . . . and Colonel Foster.'

'And Colonel Foster,' said Jackson with some satisfaction, as though it were all new to him. 'I see.' He favoured the rest of the court with a glance, making sure they were all awake, and then prompted: 'The information is then coded and transmitted automatically?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Thank you, Lieutenant.'

Webb rose. 'Lieutenant, what happens to the input card?'

'It's destroyed inside the coder.'

'But surely a record of the input is kept?'

'Yes. In the coder's memory bank.'

'So that if you, for example, wanted to, Lieutenant, you could check the content of a transmission?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And anyone else in the control room could do the same?'

'If they knew the procedure, yes, sir.'

Webb, like Jackson, eyed the bench and the other attentive faces to make sure that his point had been registered.

Jackson was up in immediate challenge. 'Just how could you check the content of a message, Lieutenant?'

'You select the relevant keys, request a print-out, and you get it. On a card, similar to the input cards.'

'But isn't it printed out in code, just as it was transmitted?'

Ford glanced in fleeting apology at Paul Foster, like a carpenter excusing himself for fitting another plank on to the scaffold.

'And,' Jackson pursued, 'isn't it necessary to use a computer run to decode it?'

Ford nodded wretchedly.

'When was the last computer run of this kind?'

‘About two weeks ago.’

‘Two weeks ago,’ said Jackson. ‘And the transmissions concerned in the security leak were both sent within the last five days.’

Ford slunk away from the witness chair.

Jackson stayed in command of the proceedings. ‘I call on Captain Waterman.’

Straker flashed an unspoken query at Freeman. Freeman leaned closer and murmured: ‘Standing in for Carlin—six weeks leave.’

‘I have just one question, Captain.’

‘Could we have a formal statement of rank and position?’ asked Henderson heavily.

‘Captain Lew Waterman, sir. At present in charge of Skydiver.’

‘Did you know the contents of the orders concerning the supply ship rendezvous transmitted to your submarine by Colonel Foster?’ asked Jackson.

‘No.’

‘Will you explain why, Captain?’

‘Until we receive confirmation the message remains encoded in our computer memory. This is standard procedure for security reasons. When we get confirmation, the message comes out in clear and we act on instructions.’

‘So until you got “action stations”, as it were, neither you nor any of your crew could have leaked the information?’

‘No.’

Jackson looked at Webb. Webb said: ‘No questions.’

Freeman saw Paul Foster make an involuntary movement of protest —a small boy starting to raise his hand in school, then thinking better of it and sinking down again.

I don’t believe it, said Freeman doggedly to himself. All right, so maybe a traitor didn’t always look like a traitor: there wouldn’t be such a thing if anyone could recognize them at first sight. But he had worked with Paul Foster, studied his training results, and watched him move towards the big promotion that could be there for him within SHADO. He would have vouched for him . . .

‘Commander Straker, please,’ Jackson was saying.

Straker strode towards the witness chair and settled himself.

‘Commander Straker, is Colonel Foster a personal friend of yours?’

‘He is an officer under my command,’ said Straker.

‘Quite so. This comrade’—Jackson was still cunningly to imply a

casualness, a lack of basic discipline—'would you consider him guilty of espionage? A traitor . . . a spy . . . in your opinion, of course?'

'I protest,' cried Webb. 'Commander Straker is being asked to prejudge the verdict.'

'Nevertheless,' said Henderson. 'I shall be interested in Commander Straker's expert opinion, for which I have always had the greatest respect.' There was no sarcasm in it. The two men might quarrel for supremacy outside, but in this courtroom Henderson was meticulous and scrupulously honest.

Straker took his time. At last he said: 'My opinion . . . Very well. As a man my opinions are private and no concern of this hearing. As Foster's commanding officer I'm interested in facts, not guesses.'

It was a stalemate.

'No more questions,' said Jackson.

Webb moved in again. 'Colonel Foster is a comparatively new member of SHADO?'

'He is.'

'You personally authorized his acceptance?'

'I did,' said Straker.

'On what did you base your decision?'

'On the results of physical, psychiatric and computer tests. On his past record as an Air Force and civil pilot. And on my own judgement.'

'He had security clearance?'

'Naturally.'

'Is this a copy of the security report on Colonel Foster?' Webb handed a folder to Straker.

'Yes.'

'Would you mind reading the last paragraph?'

Straker turned the pages without haste, and then said: ' "Colonel Foster is considered to be an excellent security risk and we recommend Class A clearance." '

'Thank you, Commander.'

Webb sat down, watching Jackson narrowly. Jackson looked not at all put out. He said in a conversational tone:

'Commander, you will observe that I was one of the examining officers on that occasion.'

Straker nodded. 'Your signature is here.'

'It only goes to show, we can all make mistakes. Don't you agree?'

It was a loaded question. No answer was forthcoming, and the prosecuting counsel expected none: he was happy in the knowledge that he had undone much of Webb's good work for the defence.

Henderson said: 'I think this may be an appropriate time to adjourn. We'll resume at 1400 hours.'

Freeman and Straker strolled away down the corridors, automatically heading back towards Control. Miss Ealand, bustling from one office doorway to another, saw them and called: 'Sir. Carl Mason wanted to see you. He said it was very urgent.'

'Mason?' Straker had been sunk in another world.

'Working on that new epic upstairs,' Freeman reminded him.

'Oh. Yes, of course.' Straker shook his head decisively at Miss Ealand and resumed his steady perambulation.

Freeman was glad of the break—the strain had been telling on him—but within fifteen minutes was wishing they could hurry things up and get back to the courtroom.

The afternoon session began with the defending officer.

Webb said in a rush, as though to trundle all the facts out as fast as possible and have the absurd charges dismissed without more ado: 'So far the facts to emerge from this hearing have shown nothing whatsoever against Colonel Foster. He was indeed in possession of the classified information as alleged, and he had authority to transmit it. There has been no proof that he passed on this information to any outside person or persons. I don't intend, therefore, to take up the Court's time with character witnesses for the accused. His record speaks for itself. I call Colonel Paul Foster.'

Foster moved forward, his eyes steadily on General Henderson.

Webb said: 'Colonel Foster, are you guilty of the charges as stated?'

'No.'

'Have you ever passed on classified information to any person or persons?'

'No.'

Webb made a gesture signifying that the whole stupid business ought to end here. He then gave way to Jackson, who moved in for the kill.

'Colonel Foster, are you nervous?'

'You're the psychiatrist.' Foster's dislike oozed out of every pore.

'Please answer the question.'

'Normally I am not a nervous person.'

‘It is part of your training to remain calm under abnormal conditions.’

‘Yes.’

‘But are you nervous now?’

‘Why should I be?’

‘Yes or no? Answer the question.’

‘No.’

‘You surprise me. I would have thought you had every reason to be. You have given classified information to the press, endangered the security of SHADO and the lives of everyone in it—’

‘Objection!’ protested Webb.

‘Colonel Foster. Did you or did you not violate Section 8 paragraph 5 of the SHADO Security regulations?’

‘No.’

‘Then how do you account for the fact that the press got hold of enough of this information to—’

‘I did not give any information to any newspaper.’

‘No?’ The intensity of Jackson’s attack abated. With creepy complacence he said, unexpectedly: ‘No, I think I believe you on that. You didn’t *give* anything.’ It came out with murderous smoothness. ‘You *sold* it.’

Webb began to shout something. Freeman turned helplessly to Straker. Henderson thundered on the table for order.

‘Here,’ said Jackson, flourishing a Photostat, ‘is a verified copy of your personal bank account. I should like you to explain an item of ten thousand dollars paid in on the tenth by an unnamed subscriber.’

‘Ten thou . . .?’ Foster was stunned. ‘It’s the first I’ve heard of it.’

‘The going price for a traitor,’ said Jackson. ‘The price of selling SHADO.’

‘It’s a plant! Someone’s trying to frame me!’

‘Perhaps a little nervous now, Foster?’

The presiding officers did not prolong the agony. They reached their decision after being out of the room only twenty minutes.

Henderson delivered it in a level tone.

‘After due deliberation we find Colonel Foster guilty of the charges as stated.’

Freeman looked at Paul Foster. He remained as rigid and unyielding

as Henderson himself.

‘Under Article 183,’ said the General, ‘the sentence is specific. Execution will be fixed for 1200 hours on the 19th of next month. This court-martial is closed.’

14

'I STILL don't believe the evidence was substantial enough,' said Freeman the following day as they walked from the car park towards the studio entrance.

'Foster was the only possibility,' said Straker. 'We write him off. That's all there is to it.'

They went in through the outer office. A man who had been sprawling in one of the leather armchairs pushed himself to his feet.

'Mr Straker, I've been trying to see you for three days.'

'I've been busy.'

'We've all been busy. I've called you a dozen times, practically slept in this office. You're going to listen.'

'Mason—'

'Well, well: recognition at last from the big white chief!'

'Look, Mason, we've all got problems—'

'You can say that again. I'm making a picture for you, right? With new gimmicks, with a star who's been offloaded on to me when I wanted someone else—and now there's another problem for the list. A security leak.'

Freeman stiffened. Mason was one of the genuine movie men. A highly paid piece of camouflage. Mason wasn't supposed to know about what went on underground, about the part Foster played down there, about any kind of SHADO security.

'Security leak?' said Straker slowly.

'This new picture hinges on a pulsed light system. As if the technical snarl-ups on that weren't bad enough! New design, big new breakthrough. Now I hear a rival company is building a replica.'

'Industrial espionage?'

'Right,' said Mason. 'I'm giving you just twelve hours to kick Foster out of this studio.'

'What's Foster got to do with it?'

'He's the one guy I discussed the system with in detail. Anybody else, they've only got part of the picture. Foster's got the lot.'

'Where?' snapped Straker.

‘Huh?‘

‘Where did you discuss this with Foster?‘

‘What’s the difference?’

‘*Where* did you discuss it?‘

‘In his apartment. That’s a laugh. We went there because it was nice and quiet—nobody to overhear us. And all the time I was handing it to him on a plate!’

Straker turned to Freeman. Before Mason could say anything further, the two men were on their way back to the car park.

‘It’s a pretty long shot,’ said Freeman.

‘Maybe. But it seems a pretty hairy coincidence.’

They reached Foster’s apartment block. Straker unclipped the small detector fitted beside the steering column. It was a standard fitment on all SHADO cars. If any curious policeman wanted to know its purpose, a flick of the knob innocently produced the non-stop clamour of BBC Radio 5.

Freeman took the detector and began to walk about the apartment, the cover of the detector opened to show the meter dial. The finger on the dial lay quite still.

Bathroom, lounge, bedroom, hallway . . . It was a waste of time. Foster was no fool: he would have run the standard check himself every week.

Straker stood with his shoulders hunched, hands in his pockets, looking into the soothing depths of the indoor garden behind Foster’s desk. Freeman made a close inspection of the walls, did another complete circuit of the room; and still the dial registered nothing.

Straker sat behind the desk. ‘When he was working, Foster would sit here.’

‘Sure.’ What difference did it make now?

‘And when Mason was here . . . Say they’d driven over from the studio, arrived around 7.30 . . . What would Foster do?’

‘Pour a drink,’ suggested Freeman.

‘That might be *your* first thought. But somebody else—after a hard day, at the studio or underground, bringing a guest in . . . relaxing . . .’

Freeman stared at the shadowy little garden.

‘Environmental therapy?’ he hazarded.

‘Let’s check it again.’ Straker thumbed a switch. Lights came on beside the desk and in the interstices of the shrubs and plants. Very soothing, Freeman had to concede.

He held the meter out. The reaction was immediate.

'Positive!' he breathed.

It was somewhere in the compact little garden.

Straker reached for the phone, and went through Voice Print routine before getting through to SHADO. Even then his request sounded banal enough. He wanted a team to come at once to a certain address to locate a fault in his gram and tape decks.

When he had rung off, he got to his feet. 'Let's start now. We'll take this place apart.'

By the time Masters and two assistants had arrived, Straker had found one audio transmitter and Freeman had dug a miniaturized camera out from the shrubbery. The three experts added another transmitter and two more cameras to the haul.

'Very clever,' said Straker.

'All activated by switching on the display lights.'

'But how did they get the stuff out? Unless, there was somebody sitting night and day at a receiving station . . .'

'Leave it to me,' said Masters.

He and one of the men disappeared for an hour, detectors packed into their jacket pockets. They returned with a small tape recorder equipped with an extending aerial.

Freeman surveyed the collection. When those little bugs started transmitting, they triggered off the distant recorder so that it received and stored all the data until some contact came along to collect the tape.

It was all familiar stuff and all of terrestrial origin. Nothing alien about this kind of equipment. So who was using whom, and where did the stuff come from?

The workshop was small but efficient. You didn't go in for heavy advertising expenditure or overheads in this line of business. Costs weren't high, but sale price could be as high as you chose to pitch it.

Straker walked in without waiting for an invitation. A girl working over a bench turned apprehensively. A man with a soldering-iron gripped it like a weapon and said: 'Who are you? This is private property.'

'Your name is Singleton,' said Straker. 'And I think this box of tricks is one of yours.'

Straker was holding out the recorder. Freeman saw the man's hand tighten on the iron, and moved closer in to Straker.

‘Maybe,’ said Singleton. ‘Maybe not. Now get out.’

‘There are two ways you can play this, Singleton. One’s the easy way—’

‘Joe!’

The girl gasped and dodged out of the workshop as Joe came in. Joe was large. He could have been a disgruntled ex-policeman turned brutish bodyguard; or he could just have been brutish in the first place. He came swinging in at Straker.

Freeman stepped past Straker. He ducked, punched hard, and spun the thug round. As Joe floundered, Singleton looked as though he might make a dash for the door. Straker took a warning step towards it.

Joe lashed out again. Freeman chopped him down, just once, definitively.

Singleton said hoarsely: ‘What do you want?’

Straker said: ‘The name and address of the client who bought that electronic peeping tom.’

‘I don’t keep records.’

‘Tell me, or I swear to you I’ll beat it out of you.’

Singleton shook his head. ‘In this trade, you just don’t keep addresses. It’s cash across the counter.’

Freeman glanced at the workbench. He spotted a can of petroleum solvent, scooped it up, and splashed the liquid over Singleton’s shoulders.

‘What are you doing? That stuff’s dangerous.’

There was a blow-lamp. Freeman lit it and swung it to and fro like a machine gun. ‘How close do you want me to get?’

‘I’ve told you, I can’t help you. I . . .’

‘How would you like to be a Roman candle?’

Singleton had his back against the bench. Freeman took a step forward.

‘Look, stay here. I’ll . . . have a look. I think . . . maybe . . . if you’ll let me get at the safe . . .’

They let him get at the safe. His records were in fact remarkably accurate. Quite useful as blackmail dossier, if ever he grew tired of his present craft.

‘Miss Jane Grant,’ said Straker, ‘of 124 Eastern Avenue. Now, what do you suppose a nice girl would want gadgets like this for?’

‘Who says she’s a nice girl?’ demanded Freeman.

‘I’ll have her picked up and wheeled into . . .’ Straker stopped, looked at Singleton, and made a noise of revulsion in his throat.

Freeman turned off the blow-lamp and tossed it at Singleton. ‘Don’t go striking any matches, friend.’

They left. In the car, Straker waved Freeman to the driving seat, while he settled at the phone.

‘Get me General Henderson. Priority A.’

Freeman relaxed as the car gathered speed. The faster they went, the quieter the car. For the first time in a long, long while he relaxed. Whoever this woman might be, girl or frustrated spinster with a grudge against someone or just with a greed for money, they were going to get some answers from her—answers that would save Paul Foster.

He could hear the relish in Straker’s voice as he said: ‘Yes, new evidence. I’ll be coming in to you in a matter of hours, with a bit of luck, with enough to clear Foster.’

Henderson’s voice splintered out of the receiver. ‘All right, Straker, maybe you do have new evidence. But I got something for *you*. Foster made a break for it twenty minutes ago.’

‘What? You mean he’s—’

‘I mean he got away. But not for long. Groups 2 and 3 have been alerted.’

‘You can’t do that!’

‘Listen,’ said Henderson. ‘Foster knows our whole set-up. He was found guilty of espionage. I’m not risking the whole organization for one man. My orders are to shoot on sight.’

Paul Foster stumbled out of the daylight into the protective twilight of the trees. He let himself sag against one of the damp, cool trunks for a moment.

It had been crazy to run for it. He had nowhere to go, couldn’t hope to escape SHADO eventually. But was it any crazier than staying meekly there to be executed?

He had kept cool all this time, in spite of the raging fury inside him. He hadn’t believed that the farce of injustice could go on right to the end. But when Webb came in to tell him that his appeal had been rejected and there was no hope of a stay of execution, he had cracked —not so much from fear as from rage. He was innocent, and there they were, telling him he was going to die simply because they had made a ludicrous blunder, had ludicrously misinterpreted a confusion of supposed facts and inferences.

Webb had been saying a formal goodbye. The door was opening for him.

Paul hit out. He tugged the door wider open, throwing the guard off balance, and dashed along the corridor. By now he knew these corridors as well as anyone, the express lift rushed him to the surface before the most urgent phone call from below could alert the surface guards. He knew his way, too, in and out of the constructional complexities of the big set on the back lot; and was over the perimeter fence and up the slope before anyone could get close.

He had a brief advantage. They couldn't make too much fuss down there. SHADO hatchet men couldn't just erupt into the middle of the studios and scream after him in too obvious a manhunt.

If he could get through the wood to the village, he could hop on a bus, or maybe find a car which he could 'borrow' for just long enough to get him down into the tangled outer suburbs of London.

And then? . . .

He pushed himself away from the tree and walked on, trying to keep steady and not panic.

Behind him, on the edge of the wood, there was the rustle of feet. He began to run. There was the terse, savage plop of a silenced gun. Another little cough, and splinters shrieked from a tree nearby.

Paul bent down, kept running. There was brighter light ahead. He knew that a footpath ran down behind a small bungalow estate. He would be too exposed out there. He turned along a diagonal which would take him away from the village, to the edge of the abandoned quarry.

When he emerged on the rim of its crater, he knew that he had been a fool to run. There was no way out. They would catch up with him any minute now. And this was even more exposed than the footpath.

But once you start running you keep running. It's less terrifying than standing still.

Paul lowered himself over the edge and half slid, half scrambled down the ragged face of the quarry. He was halfway down when the first of his pursuers appeared on the rim above him.

Below, two more guards were coming in from a path he hadn't known existed. They moved out into the red, dusty centre of the workings, taking their time; and taking their aim.

Paul stopped. Then, because there was nothing else to do but go on moving towards them until they once and for all stopped him moving, he groped his way farther down.

Stony fragments flaked away beneath his feet. He scrabbled to

retain his balance. And one of the guards below steadied his aim and fired.

Paul Foster let go, and fell.

15

JANE GRANT was in her late thirties or might just possibly be tipping over the watershed into her early forties. She would look the same when she was fifty—spruce, confident and hard. A woman in a man's world often needed to be hard: in this particular corner of that world she would need to be sculpted out of rock, however appealing and flowing the lines.

'I assume,' she said, 'you have a very good explanation as to why I've been brought here.'

Straker said: 'You are an industrial spy.'

'That sounds very sordid.'

'You had an apartment bugged for sound and vision. It belonged to Paul Foster.'

'Did I?'

'The electronics were supplied by a man named Singleton. He's told us everything.'

'Then I suggest you phone the police.'

'You know as well as I do that industrial espionage is not an indictable offence.'

'Then I suggest,' said Miss Grant, 'that you have me driven home as swiftly as you had me driven here.'

Straker opened the top drawer of his desk and took out a gun.

'This is an acoustic gun.'

'I've heard of them. Excuse the pun.'

'I'm not the joking type, Miss Grant. Right now I'm pretty desperate.'

'Armed with a toy gun.'

Straker got up. He leaned across the desk towards her and held the gun close to her ear.

'If I push this right against your ear and fire, the sound will pierce your eardrum. I'm told the brain is also damaged to varying degrees.'

'Even if I believed that'—she was still calm, still confident she would talk herself out of this the way she must have talked herself out of many other tough spots—'I don't believe you're a desperate man.

Not *that* desperate.'

'You're wrong,' said Straker.

It was his quietness that unnerved her. With a flicker of uncertainty she said: 'Look, what is this set-up, anyway? Just because this is a film studio, you don't have to ham it up like some—'

'I'm offering you no explanations, Miss Grant. I'm simply telling you that if you don't sign a confession—the kind of confession that'll ensure you keeping your mouth shut for evermore—I'm going to shut that mouth for you . . . for evermore.'

'Doesn't sound much of a choice there.'

'The choice is between two people dying—you and an innocent man—and your signing that confession.'

'I don't get it. This innocent man—'

'That's all I'm telling you, Miss Grant. But none of it's a joke, I promise you.' He steadied the gun. 'Are you going to dictate the whole story for me, fast . . . and sign it?'

She dictated. And she signed.

Freeman was waiting in the office outside. When he saw Straker waving the sheet of paper, he said: 'Foster—'

'It's all right,' said Straker. 'A signed affidavit. Get Henderson.'

'We've already had him. He just called. Foster's been shot.'

Freeman was in the car with him on the trip to Henderson's building, but Straker went in alone to see the General. The file he tossed on to the desk was flimsy, but produced at the right time it could have tipped the balance between a man's life and death.

'I'd like you to read that. Right now. It absolutely clears Paul Foster.'

Henderson opened the file sceptically.

'Hm. This Jane Grant—'

'An industrial spy. She was hired to get information about certain processes within the studio. *Our* stuff was incidental.'

'You're telling me she knew nothing about SHADO?'

'She knew nothing about it when she started. And she made precious little sense out of what she picked up as she went along. Just enough to think she might make some cash on the side by leaking it to the newspapers. Now she knows better. She knows,' said Straker, 'that there are times when a faulty tape had better be erased.'

Henderson leaned towards his intercom. 'Jackson!'

Jackson entered so promptly that he might have been suspected of

listening at the door.

Straker said: ‘You were wrong, Jackson. Foster was guilty of only one thing: he worked nights, at home. He wrote those orders to Skydiver and Moonbase while a couple of cameras in the wall were taking pictures. A devoted man: one of our best. And what you’ve done to him . . . all I hope is, it keeps you awake nights thinking about it.’

He turned to leave.

Henderson said: ‘Hold it. Look, Straker, you’re pretty ruthless in your job. Don’t you like it when we get tough up here?’

Straker looked full at Jackson. ‘Some men do a job because they have to. Some do it because they get a kick out of it.’

‘Foster was shot with an anaesthetic gun,’ said Henderson. ‘It was Jackson’s idea.’

Straker went on looking at Jackson. Then he nodded. It was the nearest he would get to expressing thanks.

Even the studio entrance looked good to Paul Foster as he approached it. Even the thought of a week of chores on the back lot was a pleasure —he heard the chippies in the workshop sawing and hammering, and somewhere a bird was singing—maybe a real bird, maybe a sound effect, but either way pretty agreeable.

The bloom was taken off the day by the sight of the man who was sauntering across one of the stages—the man with one arm round Jacyntha, the other waving affably towards Paul.

‘Mr Foster, good to see you again. Away quite a time, hey? On location, they said. Now, I’ve been watching Jacyntha, and my idea is —’

‘I’ve got something for you.’ Paul took out his wallet and extracted the cheque he had written out in readiness for this moment. ‘You did pay ten thousand dollars into my account?’

The agent glanced around, then nodded eagerly. ‘Sure, but don’t let it worry you. No one can trace where it came from.’

‘That’s what I discovered,’ said Paul grimly.

‘You understand.’

‘Sure. Oh, yes, I understand. When you came down for the screen test I didn’t know what you meant by “we can help each other”, but now you’re right: I do understand . . . only too well.’ He turned to Jacyntha. They wouldn’t have to bother with finding a new name for her. He said: ‘Get yourself a new agent, kid.’

‘Oh, come on, don’t take it like that,’ wailed the man.

‘Get out of here,’ said Paul, ‘while you can still walk.’

He waited until he was sure they were off the premises, then went through the offices and past Miss Ealand until he was in Straker’s deserted office. He lifted the lid of the cigarette box cautiously.

He said: ‘Paul Foster. Back from . . . location.’

It was a split second that echoed like an eternity. He waited for rejection. If not outright rejection, then refusal to accept him back right now. Maybe he had to swim around in limbo for a while before they would allow themselves to be sure of him again.

The unemotional voice identified him. The lift went down.

He went back along the familiar corridors, pacing with a deliberate tread over ground across which he had so recently—so long ago—fled. Faces in Control turned, accepted him, smiled.

Straker said: ‘We’ve got an assignment for you.’

Freeman said: ‘If you don’t have anything else on—’

The alarm struck instant resonances, instantaneous reactions, from everyone in the room. Gay Ellis’ voice, as limpid and unruffled as though it had come from someone a few feet away, said: ‘We have a red alert’.

Vivid lights did a mad dance across the console and then assembled into a meaningful pattern. The faces of the girls who had smiled at Paul were turned away, concentrating on screens and control panels. Straker was a chunk of steel. Freeman strolled casually from one input bank to another like a connoisseur at a dog show; but his lips didn’t move, his eyes didn’t blink.

Somewhere out there a UFO was sizzling in. The scanners had sniffed it out. Moon and Earth watched and secretly prepared. Everyday jet services shuttled to and fro above the oceans, hovertrains raced on the Intercity routes, television shows warmed up and bars and restaurants prepared for another day’s influx. None of them knew what was racing down upon them.

If SHADO had its way, they would never have to know.

Gay Ellis on the Moon, Straker and Freeman here, Peter Carlin forever alert in his prowling Skydiver . . . all were focused, all poised, all ready to strike.

They would blast this one out of the skies. And the next, and the one after that. They would be waiting and watchful until the time came when there were no further threats.

Paul Foster belonged here. He would be here with the rest of them

for as long as it took to finish the job—for a lifetime, if necessary.